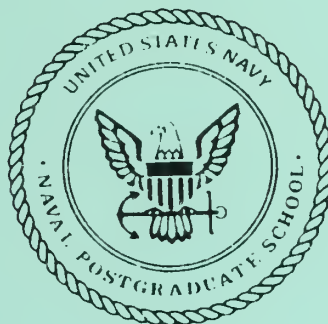


# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL Monterey , California



## THESIS

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND NAVY  
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

by

Mary Theo Hoeksema

September, 1997

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1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE September, 1997	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's Thesis	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND NAVY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Hoeksema, Mary Theo				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words) In recent years, the Navy has been plagued by a series of non-operational events that have attracted negative attention from the media and intense scrutiny from political leaders, special interest groups and the public. Too often, Navy responses to this scrutiny have been counterproductive. This study suggests that the Navy could benefit from a broader definition of what constitutes an organizational crisis. Also, a more complex approach to crisis management is needed, especially when the potential for damage to the institutional image is high. This thesis proposes a formalized system of crisis management. It also presents critical case studies to illustrate how organizational culture can serve as an impediment to constructive crisis management. The cases reviewed include the Naval Academy's handling of the 1989 Gwen Dreyer sexual harassment and hazing incident, the 1992 Electrical Engineering 311 exam cheating scandal, and the critical editorial written by faculty member James Barry and published in <u>The Washington Post</u> in March 1996. My research concludes that the key to effective crisis management is an organizational culture which institutionalizes the use of ethical and constructive practices.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS Crisis management, organizational culture, Naval Academy			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 110	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UL	



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**CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND NAVY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**  
**September, 1997**

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## ABSTRACT

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In recent years, the Navy has been plagued by a series of non-operational events that have attracted negative attention from the media and intense scrutiny from political leaders, special interest groups and the public. Too often, Navy responses to this scrutiny have been counterproductive. This study suggests that the Navy could benefit from a broader definition of what constitutes an organizational crisis. Also, a more complex approach to crisis management is needed, especially when the potential for damage to the institutional image is high.

This thesis proposes a formalized system of crisis management. It also presents critical case studies to illustrate how organizational culture can serve as an impediment to constructive crisis management. The cases reviewed include the Naval Academy's handling of the 1989 Gwen Dreyer sexual harassment and hazing incident, the 1992 Electrical Engineering 311 exam cheating scandal, and the critical editorial written by faculty member James Barry and published by *The Washington Post* in March 1996. My research concludes that the key to effective crisis management is an organizational culture which institutionalizes the use of ethical and constructive practices.

THE  
JOURNAL  
OF  
THE  
ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE  
OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND  
VOLUME 31  
PART 1  
1901  
LONDON  
PUBLISHED BY THE INSTITUTE  
11, BEDFORD SQUARE, W.C.1



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## I. INTRODUCTION

When naval strategy addresses the subject of crisis response, it is referring to operational crises which call for the employment of military force.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the Navy has suffered from crises of a different type, which, according to some, have left the Navy “adrift,”<sup>2</sup> a “scandal-ridden and divided service.”<sup>3</sup> These unexpected and unwelcome non-combat related events have attracted attention from the media and intense scrutiny from political leaders, special interest groups and the public. A short list of these events stretches back to the late 1980s: the handling of the Iowa battleship turret explosion, Tailhook '91, the U.S. Naval Academy cheating/drug dealing/car theft/sexual harassment scandals, flag officer misconduct, and Admiral Boorda's suicide. Norman Polmar, a prominent navalist, believes that these events “have so shattered morale within the Navy that its performance as a fighting force may now be in question.”<sup>4</sup> The result of these public relations crises has been a sullied, if not damaged, Navy public image.<sup>5</sup>

The Navy could benefit from a more complex and systematic approach to crisis management, especially crisis communications. Specifically, I will explore the role of organizational culture as a critical variable in the crisis management process. I examine the proposition that these highly publicized events provide the Navy with a window of opportunity to change counterproductive aspects of organizational culture, and that this

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Dalton, *Forward . . . From the Sea* (Washington: Department of the Navy, 1994) p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>David Evans, “The Navy’s Blues,” *The New York Times*, 8 June 1996, Sec. 1 p. 19. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

<sup>3</sup>“Unfair to Blame Newsweek for Admiral Mike Boorda’s Suicide,” *The New Republic* 214, no. 24 (10 June 1996), p. 6. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

<sup>4</sup>Norman Polmar quoted in Philip Shenon, “5 Years Later, Navy Is Still Reeling From Tarnish of Tailhook Incident,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

<sup>5</sup>Stan Zimmerman, “The Battle for the Lasting Impression,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (May 1997), p. 44.

change is actually facilitated by the public attention associated with the media spotlight. Ultimately, better understanding of the crisis management process, as well as improved practices and a determination to adapt behaviors and attitudes to modern circumstances, may allow the Navy to manage public relations crises in ways that contribute to organizational health instead of inflicting more scars on its already damaged public image.

This thesis suggests innovative crisis management policies and practices for the Navy. And it highlights how culture influences organizational behavior.<sup>6</sup> Chapter II discusses the Navy's current circumstances related to crisis management and organizational image. Following a survey of current literature about crisis management and related fields in Chapter III, I identify the processes at work when the Navy responds to a crisis. To illustrate what process dynamics are exerting the most influence during crisis management, I examine official Navy policy related to crisis response in Chapter IV. In reviewing Navy crisis management, I will look for the major elements of optimal crisis management discussed in Chapter III. I will review written directives in the form of instructions to determine how the Navy defines organizational crises and to ascertain the extent that formal crisis management practices in the Navy reflect the sorts of activities recommended by experts. I will also examine Navy organizational culture to see how it relates to optimum crisis management. Case studies are presented in Chapter V. My case studies involve an examination of the string of organizational crises suffered by the

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<sup>6</sup>Carl Builder explains why knowledge of organizational culture is important to achieve organizational change; "Possibly the best hope for change in the American military institutions . . . is through a better understanding of institutions by those within them and by those who must deal with them. . . . If those who are members of an institution and those who deal with institutions understand why the institution behaves the way it does, then the ways of modifying that behavior equals or exceeds the number of people who have that understanding, for each can take actions, even if only for one's self, that will contribute eventually to change." Carl Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles In Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press for RAND, 1989), p. 205.

Naval Academy since the early 1990s. I selected these cases for several reasons: first, the Naval Academy imbues a cadre of future naval officers with Navy culture and traditions; second, the impact of Naval Academy graduates on the fleet is magnified by their disproportionate representation at the highest levels of Navy leadership, as well as at lower levels of the officer corps where they are expected to purvey Navy culture to others by setting an example “that like-minded officers from other sources will want to rally around;”<sup>7</sup> and finally, the crises at the Naval Academy have been studied and written about extensively by individuals and groups both inside and outside of the organization, so there is a considerable amount of data for study. To conclude my thesis, Chapter VI offers recommendations for better Navy crisis management.

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<sup>7</sup>Charles R. Larson, Admiral, USN, “Service Academies: Critical to Our Future,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (October 1997), p. 36.





## II. THE NAVY'S ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE

In this chapter, I identify problems often associated with a poor Navy image, and provide reasons why the Navy needs a more sophisticated approach to crisis management. Next, I outline the military-media relationship -- the conflict between these important American institutions is often cited as the reason for the damaged public image of the armed services. Discussions of this relationship have tended to focus on the discord instead of the conditions which cause friction. Yet, among those few who have suggested constructive measures aimed at improving the relationship, a consensus has emerged that most changes will depend on the services' efforts to modify their own attitudes and behaviors toward the media. Lastly, I will explore the concept that Navy organizational culture plays an important role in shaping attitudes and behaviors, and discuss the dangers associated with a service culture that is out of step with the culture and expectations of the society it serves.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the potential costs of a poor organizational image include the investment of time and effort in "damage control" activities, lower organizational morale, and recruiting problems caused by a decreased propensity to serve in the Navy. Assessing the impact of an organizational crisis is different for a public organization than it is for commercial enterprises. Many modern businesses interested in crisis management analyze the success or failure of their efforts to handle unexpected problems based on various measures of organizational health taken prior to, during, and after potentially negative events. Standard measures of organizational health for businesses include changes in

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<sup>8</sup>In his study of the various "personalities" of the American armed services, Carl Builder describes the U.S. Navy's identity as being supremely independent with an institutional stature "on a level with that of the U.S. government (with which the Navy must sometimes suffer). . . ." This degree of independence and stature implies legitimate autonomy to behave in ways which may not be supported by civilians, military leaders, Congress or the public. Carl Builder, *The Masks of War*, p. 31.

productivity, stock price or profitability. By contrast, few of these measurements are appropriate for the military services. Operational competence, readiness, retention, recruit quality, and congressional support are more relevant variables for the military, but these variables are difficult to measure or interpret as specific factors in a cause-and-effect relationship.

As the Navy becomes a smaller force and the operational demands placed on it remain steady, the Navy can ill afford to allow public relations crises to occupy valuable personnel with counterproductive crisis response activities. Dissatisfaction among the Navy's political benefactors in Congress as well as disappointment and frustration among sailors may not result in directly measurable harm to the organization, but neither development can be considered helpful in today's fiscally constrained and turbulent political environment. Likewise, as recruiting becomes more difficult for all of the services, a positive public image of the Navy is crucial in meeting recruitment goals.

Recent studies reveal several trends which make recruiting difficult today, and more difficult in the future. First, the primary social group from which all of the services draw new members -- 18 year old white males -- is getting smaller as a percentage of the youth cohort; African Americans, Hispanics and other minorities are growing as percentages of the population. Second, youth overall -- and high-quality minority youth in particular -- are less interested in serving in the military.<sup>9</sup> Third, these are associated with the higher recruitment goals necessitated by the end of the post-Cold War drawdown. Starting in 1997, the Navy needs 19 percent more enlistments in FY 97 than it did in FY 96.<sup>10</sup> During the drawdown, recruit quality remained high, with only a slightly declining

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<sup>9</sup>Bruce R. Orvis, Narayan Sastry and Laurie L. McDonald, *Military Recruiting Outlook: Recent Trends in Enlistment Propensity and Conversion of Potential Supply* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), p. xii. This trend is most pronounced among high-quality African-American youth.

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Compart, "Navy Sets Its Recruiting Sights Higher in '97," *Navy Times*, 2



trend evident since 1992, but increased demand for new recruits across the services may further strain recruit quality.<sup>11</sup> To complicate recruiting further, a recent Harris Poll indicates that public confidence in the military as an institution is declining; from 1996 to 1997 the respondents who claimed to have “a great deal of confidence in the military” dropped from 47 percent to 37 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Research indicates that “key influencers” (parents, school counselors and friends) are effective in shaping decisions to join the military; if the services in general have lower status among members of the wider public, and a strong economy offers other opportunities, then a negative service image will make recruiting high-quality personnel even more challenging.<sup>13</sup> Although the impact of these trends so far has been marginal, the cumulative effect over time will hamper the Navy's future ability to recruit quality personnel -- consistently cited by Navy leaders as its “most valued resource.”<sup>14</sup>

Interested observers cannot help but be aware of the debate surrounding the Navy's troubles. Navy defenders have acknowledged some problems, but charge the media with unjustified attacks and extreme sensationalism at the Navy's expense. According to one author, “there is a widespread perception in the Navy today that the press is the enemy.”<sup>15</sup> Navy critics, on the other hand, have called the Navy's leadership and ethical foundations into question. Others see fault in both camps: “America's Navy

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December 1996, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Recruiting: More Innovative Approaches Needed* (Washington, DC: U.S. GAO, 1994), pp. 26-29.

<sup>12</sup>“A Falling Star,” *The Navy Times*, 2 June 1997. Additionally, in May 1997 the U.S. unemployment rate fell to 4.9 percent, the lowest level in over twenty-three years. Low unemployment correlates directly with decreased propensity to join the military. “Hurting From a Good Economy,” *The Navy Times*, 19 May 1997.

<sup>13</sup>Orvis, Sastry and McDonald, *Military Recruiting Outlook*, p. 36. Although this study found no evidence that influencers had become more negative, the data are inconclusive.

<sup>14</sup>Frank. B. Kelso and Carl. E. Mundy, *Naval Doctrine Publication 1: Naval Warfare* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup>Zimmerman, “The Battle of the Lasting Impression,” p. 44.

has a poor record of candor with the public and the press; and the press, in turn, has repaid it.”<sup>16</sup>

Naval officers are not alone in their low esteem of the mass media, especially since the advent of so-called modern tabloid journalism.<sup>17</sup> This unpopularity makes it easy for some to blame the media for causing or contributing to many of the Navy’s perceived problems. “The public will, driven by a harsh media, has been like a gale-force wind blowing through the Department, catching good, decent men like Larry Garrett, Frank Kelso, and now Mike Boorda in its path,” concluded Dan Howard, former Under Secretary of the Navy.<sup>18</sup> Claims of media persecution of the Navy became particularly emotional following the May 1996 suicide of the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Boorda. This is perhaps the most dramatic example of a recent institutional crisis which affected both the service’s morale and its public image. Admiral Boorda’s suicide had been linked to a planned *Newsweek* story concerning his wearing of allegedly unauthorized awards. David Hackworth, the reporter pursuing the story, had been described as taking “great pride in saying that he was working on a story that would bring a Navy admiral down, and the Navy to its knees.”<sup>19</sup>

A 1995 Freedom Forum First Amendment Center study, which involved a survey of attitudes held by both military officers and media representatives, provides evidence of deeply held opinions among military members that the media is biased against the armed

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<sup>16</sup>“The Navy. A Cruise Among Rocks,” *The Economist*, 25 May 1996, p. 28. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

<sup>17</sup>Frank Aukofer and William P. Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple, A Report on the Relationship Between the Media and the Military* (Nashville: Freedom Forum, 1995), p. vii.

<sup>18</sup>Dan Howard, “What Price Leadership,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (July 1996), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup>Air Force Chief of Public Affairs Brigadier General Ronald Sconyers, quoted in Nick Kotz “Breaking Point,” *The Washingtonian* (December 1996), p. 107. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

forces. A vast majority of the officers, and almost half of the media representatives, think that “the news media are more interested in negative stories of wrongdoing or scandals than positive stories of victories or efficient operations.”<sup>20</sup> Military officers generally believe that the news media fails to live up to its role in society as a result of media preoccupation with “increasing readership or viewership,” as well as “personal power.”<sup>21</sup> Since increasingly few media personnel have military experience and fewer reporters are assigned to full-time military beats, there is concern that the press lacks sufficient appreciation of the demanding nature of a military career.

A recent Air University thesis asserts that rather than informing the public, the media “orchestrates” public opinion, which unduly influences government policy.<sup>22</sup> Both the thesis and the Freedom Forum study link distrust of the media by the military to beliefs that the media lost the war in Vietnam, or contributed to the U.S. defeat on some level.<sup>23</sup>

Advocates of a free and open press, however, view negative military attitudes toward the media, as well as unethical behavior on the part of the military, as the problem. Commenting on overall military attitudes, one former Army officer and career journalist writes, “An anti-press bias akin to the mindless hostility of anti-Semitism or anti-Catholicism runs through much of the officer corps today.”<sup>24</sup> He blames this trend on the common military use of the press as a scapegoat for Vietnam, a desire to avoid critical or embarrassing coverage, lack of understanding about the First Amendment among officers, and a reaction to media excesses.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Aukofer and Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Marc D. Felman, *The Military/Media Clash and the New Principle of War: Media Spin* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1993), pp. 1-9.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8, and Aukofer and Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup>Richard Halloran, “Soldiers and Scribblers: Working with the Media,” *Parameters* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 152.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

Generally, reporters believe they are treated poorly by military personnel who do not appreciate the role of free press in a democracy. Over half of the media representatives who participated in the Freedom Forum study expressed the belief that the military is dishonest to some extent when dealing with the press. Some military critics focus on the hierarchical, closed nature of military organizations, which can be inherently hostile to outsiders -- especially those who lack experience in the armed forces or who do not understand military missions. Many believe that the military's need to protect sensitive information encourages a tolerance of censorship and overly zealous control of information which encroaches on the press' constitutional role in American society. Virtually all of the media respondents agreed that because of a desire to protect organizational images the military cannot be trusted to tell the full truth, even when there is no operational requirement for secrecy or deception.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally, the naval services have been both the most independent and most socially isolated.<sup>27</sup> The Navy has been criticized widely during the past decade for lack of honesty and candor when addressing issues that have generated media interest. The sensational and highly controversial book by journalist Gregory Vistica, *Fall From Glory: The Men Who Sank the U.S. Navy*, alleges that Navy leaders have systematically misled politicians and the public for years out of a loyalty to the Navy that surpasses loyalty to the country. Although this book has been heavily criticized among Navy defenders, a recent essay by another journalist who accused the Navy of institutional mendacity was the third place winner in a prestigious U.S. Naval Institute contest. Stan Zimmerman's essay claimed that "the Navy played a disingenuous game with the press" in an attempt to win

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<sup>26</sup>Aukofer and Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple*, pp. 29-33.

<sup>27</sup>Builder, *The Masks of War*, pp. 31-32, and James Kitfield, "Who 'Just Doesn't Get It' Now?" *Government Executive*, September 1994.



the battle of the “first impression,” with little or no concern for how this approach would affect the “lasting impression.”<sup>28</sup>

The conflict between the military and the media has served the purpose of calling attention to inadequacies and cynicism on both sides. Numerous studies, panels, papers and conferences have resulted from a recognition among the leadership of both institutions that a better relationship is needed. A consistent theme in examinations of this relationship is that if improvements are to be made, they depend mostly on the military’s efforts to change its own behaviors and attitudes. Various experts have described aptly the media as a fragmented and disorganized collective that is not easily disciplined or led in a new direction. The military, by contrast, not only is organized in ways that allow for changes in policies and practices, but also it should be highly motivated to adopt them.<sup>29</sup> According to Stan Zimmerman, “The Navy must adapt its tactics -- and perhaps even its culture,” to operate more successfully in the modern media environment.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the crises which have plagued the Navy in the last decade have their roots in deeply held cultural values and behavioral norms which are not shared to the same degree by Americans outside the Navy. As a large and successful organization with a long history and strong traditions, the Navy is frequently viewed as being constrained by bureaucratic and cultural rigidity. In the era of the all-volunteer- force, especially as the post-Cold War drawdown continues, the Navy might be growing more isolated from American society. As a result, according to a social-political model developed by Stephen Peter Rosen, it is “less affected by the general norms and social structures” of the larger society.<sup>31</sup> His research concludes that a military organization that “rejects the social

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<sup>28</sup>Zimmerman, “The Battle of the Lasting Impression,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup>Aukofer and Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup>Zimmerman, “The Battle of the Lasting Impression,” p. 44.

<sup>31</sup>Stephen Peter Rosen, “Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters,” *International*

structures accepted by the society as a whole . . . may then be seen as an alien element by that society. This will generate civil-military friction that will reduce the military power, not of the military, but of the state as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> If, as Rosen claims, “Individuals and societies value modes of social behavior in their armies as much or more than they value military power,”<sup>33</sup> then military organizations cannot escape pressure to change in ways to better reflect dominant social values. A military organization that is socially isolated and culturally rigid may fail to adapt to changing circumstances, while at the same time experiencing increased pressure from society to transform itself.

My assumption is that some aspects of Navy organizational culture strain civil-military relations as evidenced by numerous organizational crises and an inability to manage them in ways that ultimately benefit the organization. I hypothesize that this inability to adapt to changing circumstances has contributed to the recent organizational crises in the Navy, and has affected the way Navy leaders react to and communicate about critical events after they have occurred. These changing circumstances include the rise of an aggressive and attentive modern media, and changing public and political expectations, especially where social issues and ethical behavior are concerned.

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*Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995), p. 29.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6. As used by Rosen, the term ‘social structure’ encompasses a wide variety of functional sub-units of society which do not necessarily reflect ‘cultures’. I will argue that while structures are usually functional in nature, cultures often develop which are directly related to these functions.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17.

### III. CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Crisis management is a new field which has evolved during the last two decades. There are no comprehensive theories of crisis management, however numerous models and prescriptions for better crisis management exist. A few experts from various fields have provided analysis concerning crisis management which touches on social theories of organizational behavior, especially those relating to organizational culture. David Ross and James Benson offer a well developed perspective of organizational culture and its role in crisis management. They recognize that effective crisis response requires effective external communication strategies, such as those advocated in most crisis management literature.<sup>34</sup> An approach to crisis management which combines specific normative prescriptions with an understanding of the role of organizational culture best addresses the complexities of crisis management and suggests some of the factors which encourage or limit the adoption and execution of optimal crisis management strategies. Crisis outcomes are influenced by organization and process factors as well as culture.

#### 1. Crisis Management

Organizational management and communications theory has contributed most to crisis management literature, but it largely remains a collection of normative and prescriptive analyses lacking in explicit theoretical foundations. The private sector has increasingly become interested in crisis management in the wake of the 1979 Three Mile Island meltdown, the 1982 Johnson & Johnson Tylenol tampering crisis and the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal. These types of crises alerted business leaders to the harm or good that could result from various crisis management practices.

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<sup>34</sup>David L. Ross and James A. Benson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption: A Corporate Case Study," *Journal of Business Communication* 32, no. 4 (October 1995), pp. 345-362. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 4 February 1997.

Crisis management literature is directed toward practitioners. It often takes the form of fairly simple ‘lessons learned’ based on case studies. Recommendations, usually presented in checklist form, address practices and policies to undertake or avoid. Even when more complex remedies are offered, those which advocate significant reorganization or restructuring, they often fail to appreciate the complex interaction of social forces at work in organizations. Moreover, these approaches tend to address all organizational behavior as if it were objective and rational. Since much organizational behavior is self-interested and guided by subjective, culturally driven forces within an organization, normative prescriptions must be viewed within the context of real organizational behavior.

The rapid and ubiquitous nature of modern mass media make it imperative that organizations structure themselves in ways that facilitate quick decision-making and effective communication practices. The media can broadcast reports almost instantly from virtually anywhere, so it behooves organizations to be prepared to respond to queries or allegations just as quickly. Case studies have revealed that certain organizational structures and processes which emphasize preparation and coordinated action during crises facilitate this type of response. The dangers of not responding appropriately include compounding the organizational crisis at hand with an appearance of dishonesty, organizational dysfunction, or both. Structures or practices which delay or inhibit organizational coordination and decision making are not the only reasons an organization may be undermining its crisis communication; it may be spinning or hiding information, or it may be attempting to justify practices and policies out of step with stakeholder expectations.<sup>35</sup> Fixing poor structures or processes will not necessarily address the

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<sup>35</sup>Stakeholders are individuals with an interest in an particular organization. Stockholders, customers and suppliers are common stakeholders for private businesses. For the Navy, stakeholders include the American public, the media, special interest groups, defense firms, local and national political leaders, populations living near Navy facilities, retirees, service members and their families.



problems caused by organizational cultures which allow or encourage detrimental behaviors, such as denial, obfuscation or legalistic responses. Official policies can be undermined in organizations where harmful practices and attitudes thrive without consequences, or where fundamental values are in conflict between organizations and their stakeholders.

Virtually all crisis management analysis involves the use of case studies, an approach that presents certain limitations. In many cases, the same behaviors and decisions may be explained various ways depending upon the perspective of the researcher studying the case. Also, gaining access to details about organizational decision-making and behavior during crisis situations is difficult. Studies may be biased by imperfect information. Case studies tend to rely on interviews with organizational leaders long after crises are over. Not all leaders are comfortable discussing painful organizational events, especially those where damage has been severe, so the cases studied tend to focus on when leaders viewed their own behavior to be successful. Furthermore, most case studies rely heavily upon observations and reports of organizational decisions and behaviors as related by third parties, such as the investigative agencies and the media.

Additionally, relatively little crisis management research has focused on government organizations (with NASA and quasi-public enterprises such as Amtrak being the primary exceptions). Although crises might result in different problems for private organizations as opposed to public ones (e.g., falling stock prices), many of the events themselves are similar (e.g., accidents, equipment failures, employee misconduct), and crisis management is generally the same. For these reasons valuable lessons may be drawn from private sector cases for application to government agencies.

Despite some limitations, the application of well developed theoretical paradigms to crisis management in government organizations can offer some insight to more successful or productive organizational behavior. Certainly, based on the proliferation of

books and articles concerning crisis management during recent years, the civilian business community has indicated that an informed and systematic approach to crisis management is a worthwhile endeavor.

Crisis management is best explained as a system of interconnected organizational processes which operate prior to, during and after a crisis occurs. Some processes are functional and fairly continuous, some are unconscious, and others can either be planned or reactive depending on how the organization is prepared for crisis events. Effective crisis management requires an understanding of this system of processes. As Fink points out, "Crises need not be the seemingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable events that their victims too often allow them to become."<sup>36</sup>

David Hurst, a businessman and academician who writes on organizational behavior, defines a crisis as "the manifest failure of the status quo that [can] not be rationalized away or denied."<sup>37</sup> According to crisis management expert Lawrence Barton, organizational "crises" can be differentiated from "problems" by examining the potential for negative impacts from these events, as well as the likelihood of attracting attention from sources external to the organization. Barton says "problems can be addressed in a *limited* time frame without arousing public attention and without draining the human resources of an organization." However, he defines a crisis as a major unanticipated event, which together with its aftermath, "may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation."<sup>38</sup> Stephen Fink, a management consultant and crisis management team member for the Three Mile Island

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<sup>36</sup>Stephen Fink, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* (New York: AMACOM, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>37</sup>David Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1995) p. 68.

<sup>38</sup>Laurence Barton, *Crisis In Organizations: Managing and Communicating in the Heat of Chaos* (Cincinnati: South-Western Publishing, 1993), p. 2.

meltdown, emphasizes that crises are “turning points” that are “characterized by a certain degree of risk and uncertainty.”<sup>39</sup> Many experts are proponents of viewing crises as opportunities. According to Fink, “A crisis is an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending -- either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome.”<sup>40</sup>

Fink’s “positive outcome” is dependent on preventive crisis management -- something advocated by all experts in the field -- but extremely difficult to put into practice. Preventive crisis management requires sensitivity to warning signs which might be evident during pre-crisis periods.<sup>41</sup> Virtually all crisis management literature emphasizes strategic planning for crisis management which involves extensive preventive activities. Other experts, such as Hurst, and Ian Mitroff also view crises as opportunities for desirable outcomes, although they put less emphasis on preventive activities. Hurst views organizations as complex ecosystems like forests; he argues that just as forests benefit from fires, organizations benefit from crises which destroy rigid structures and allow for creative renewal. Hurst views the acute pain of crisis itself as a potential catalyst for creative organizational action which can overcome rigid organizational constraints and adapt to changing circumstances -- activities which are difficult to initiate in organizations operating in a successful and non-crisis mode.<sup>42</sup> Ian Mitroff, one of the most renowned crisis management scholars, says that “complete crisis prevention is not necessarily the goal of crisis management.” He also views rapid organizational recovery and effective integration of lessons learned to be important outcomes.<sup>43</sup> These arguments have merit;

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<sup>39</sup>Fink, *Crisis Management*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>42</sup>Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal*, pp. 102 - 136.

<sup>43</sup>Ian I. Mitroff, “Crisis Management and Environmentalism: A Natural Fit,” *California*

however, the potential for organizations to accept and integrate lessons learned from various crises depends on the cultural context being considered.

Effective crisis management entails an understanding of optimal practices and policies as well as organizational culture. One of the most widely agreed upon principles among experts is that all phases of crisis management should be a team effort. Included in this effort is pre-crisis planning and prevention, active crisis management, and post-crisis evaluation. Mitroff suggests that official policies reflect a commitment to a cross-functional approach to crisis management and to ongoing “activities for the design, redesign, and implementation of key plans, procedures and mechanisms for the detection, possible prevention, containment, recovery and learning from key crises.”<sup>44</sup> These activities encompass the development of a formal crisis management plan. They also suggest the development of organizational structures and processes which facilitate coordination of information and decisions throughout the phases of crisis management. In summary, formal practices and policies which call for the involvement of a broad range of organizational members best ensures that organizations will plan appropriately, respond effectively to emerging crises, and use lessons learned to adapt to new circumstances or expectations if necessary.

Barton writes that effective crisis management begins by establishing a sound foundation of relevant knowledge as well as information about environmental trends and organizational vulnerability; this knowledge and information should reside at the top levels of an organization. He suggests that leaders understand the theoretical and practical aspects of such fields as public relations, strategic planning, organizational theory, and

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*Management Review* 36, no. 2 (Winter 1994), pp. 101-113. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.

<sup>44</sup>Ian I. Mitroff, Richard O. Mason, Christine M. Pearson, “Radical Surgery: What Will Tomorrow’s Organizations Look Like?” *Academy of Management Executive* 8, no. 2 (May 1994), pp. 11-21. Lexis-Nexis on-line service 15 April 1997.



ethics in order to be effective crisis managers.<sup>45</sup> This knowledge base is supposed to enable leaders to engage in effective preventive and planning activities, and to perform constructively during active crisis management.

Experts suggest that organizational vulnerability assessments are crucial preventive activities. Vulnerability or risk assessments involve the collection of relevant information about stakeholder concerns and perceptions as well as analysis of trends affecting similar organizations. Several factors contribute to assessments of organizational vulnerability: the size and complexity of the total system, the conduct of high-risk operations, the number and variety of organizational stakeholders, and major changes such as reorganization and downsizing. Trend identification and vulnerability assessment should be done periodically, and should result in the development of formal preventive strategies and contingency plans.

In the pre-crisis planning and prevention stage, leaders need to “think out of the box” about what constitutes a crisis, and a team approach facilitates that effort. According to Mitroff, “The ‘true’ purpose of crisis planning is to ‘think about the unthinkable’ prior to its occurrence. . . . The worst organizations act under the illusion that they are vulnerable to only a limited number of threats.”<sup>46</sup> Studies have revealed that lack of teamwork has contributed to poor crisis management. Two common problems involve the relegation of crisis management to one functional area, usually public relations. Another is allowing legal perspectives to dominate decision making and communications, especially during active crisis management.

Although crisis communications is a key aspect of crisis management, when crisis events actually occur, they absorb the time and energy of individuals well beyond the public relations department. Organizational leaders, technical experts and resource

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<sup>45</sup>Barton, *Crisis in Organizations*, p. 33.

<sup>46</sup>Mitroff, “Crisis Management and Environmentalism,” pp. 101-113.

managers should be involved long before problems become critical to bring their perspectives to prevention and planning activities.

Overly legalistic approaches often cause problems for organizations, while failing to solve the crisis at hand. According to Kathy Fitzpatrick, a public relations and legal expert, "When crisis strikes, organizations face potentially devastating public relations and legal consequences. . . [they] risk losing both their credibility with important constituents, as well as incurring legal liability for alleged bad acts."<sup>47</sup> This dynamic can influence the adoption of a legalistic or "no comment" approach to crisis communications during crisis events. Fitzpatrick's research indicates that almost two-thirds of the organizations studied applied the legal strategy to the public communication process. A legal strategy may be implemented various ways. When faced with a crisis, organizations can choose to say nothing; say as little as possible and release information as quietly as possible; say as little as possible, citing privacy laws, company policy or sensitivity; deny guilt; or, shift or share the blame with another party. Ultimately, Fitzpatrick concludes that the dominance of this strategy among organizations today is short-sighted -- it trades the avoidance of legal risk or embarrassment in the short-term for long-term damage to relationships with important publics which can be equally costly.<sup>48</sup>

A balance between effective communication and legal risk avoidance is necessary. According to Fitzpatrick, it can be achieved by including both the legal and public relations factors into strategic crisis response planning. The tactical considerations of getting the message out are less important than making sure the message responds to the crisis at hand. Fitzpatrick proposes several suggestions for legal risk reduction including analyzing legal trends, learning from others' mistakes, demonstrating a "continuing

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<sup>47</sup>Kathy R. Fitzpatrick, "Ten Guidelines for Reducing Legal Risks in Crisis Management," *Public Relations Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 33-38. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 29 May 1997.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

commitment to legal compliance and ethical performance,” and the promoting ethical organizational behavior.<sup>49</sup> An organization that has earned a reputation as an “honest broker” is less likely to be suspected of hiding relevant facts when information must be restricted for legitimate reasons.

Mitroff et.al. outline four primary prevention activities: repair and design of internal organizational systems (e.g., safety improvements, inspection systems), emotional preparation of the workforce (e.g., implementation of whistle-blower programs, employee training), various audits (e.g., legal and financial reviews, environmental impact statements), and issues management.<sup>50</sup> The first three are well understood organizational activities and certainly play a role in crisis management; however, issues management is unfamiliar to most. Issues management is especially important because it provides a critical interface between the organization and its stakeholders, and supports efforts to establish organizational legitimacy. It is an activity which feeds vulnerability assessments, as well as day to day public relations efforts. However, writes Debra Kernisky, “It is not simple public relations or advocacy advertising, but is an array of activities and attitudes designed to adjust the company to the public and help the public understand the complexity and requirements of the organization.”<sup>51</sup> Issues management should help organizations articulate missions better and improve social responsiveness.

Issues management requires that organizations observe the environment and interact with the media and other stakeholders to build goodwill and demonstrate care about the community, while being alert to early warnings of a crisis. Peter Bartha

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ian I. Mitroff, Thierry C. Pauchant, and Paul Shrivastava, “Crisis, Disaster, Catastrophe: Are You Ready?” *Security Management* 33, no. 2 (February 1989), p. 101. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.

<sup>51</sup>Debra A. Kernisky, “Proactive Crisis Management and Ethical Discourse: Dow Chemical’s Issues Management Bulletins 1979-1990,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 16, no. 8 (June 1997), pp. 843-853. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.

promotes issues management as “a low-cost technique that can be put to good use to minimize the chances of a high-cost crisis.”<sup>52</sup> Bartha defines issues management as “a systematic process to help an organization identify, assess and deal with significant threats and opportunities in its external environment before threats turn into crises or opportunities fade away.” The process consists of various activities: environmental scanning, issues and stakeholder assessment, situation analysis, action planning, and program design and implementation.<sup>53</sup> This is a much more complex and interactive process than standard public relations campaigns where the bulk of the communication is one-way (organization to stakeholder). Experts advocate a much higher mix of “listening” to “talking” to understand perspectives different from that of the organization.

Scanning the environment provides valuable data concerning the expectations and perceptions of stakeholder groups. For the Navy, stakeholders include the American public, the media, special interest groups, defense firms, local and national political leaders, retirees, service members and their families. Scanning the environment contributes to crisis prevention by feeding information back to organizational planners who need to be aware of environmental trends and stakeholder concerns. It also allows for meaningful interaction with stakeholders, that is interaction which is sensitive to their concerns. Scanning the environment also helps organizations anticipate the issues that are likely to draw media coverage. For example, the Institute for Crisis Management has identified “soft” issues relating to human resources and white collar crime as the most likely crisis areas today. They argue that crises associated with human error, unethical behavior or poor judgment not only attract media attention, but they also tend to

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<sup>52</sup>Peter Bartha, “Preventing a High-Cost Crisis,” *Business Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 42-53. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*



“smolder” and provide signals long before crises occur.<sup>54</sup> Organizations that are aware of the trends have a better chance of being able to recognize vulnerabilities in those areas.

Bartha notes that “a social issue is not an objective condition, but rather a subjective interpretation, or spin, placed on it by these stakeholders.” In his view, various stakeholders are “in competition” to define any particular issue.<sup>55</sup> This lack of consensus among stakeholders on various issues complicates the processes of assessment and situation analysis. Bartha writes, “In an ideal world, there is congruency between what stakeholders want your organization to do (expectations), what they see your organization doing (perceptions) and what your organization is doing (practice). But in the real world there are gaps between [sic] the three concepts, which can pose major problems.”<sup>56</sup> He points out that understanding the various gaps among expectations, perceptions and practices “yields a better comprehension of the relevant issues and provides a clue to managing stakeholder relations.”<sup>57</sup> Bartha provides an example to clarify his meaning here:

For example, the source of the problem may well be a misperception; the organization is performing in line with stakeholder expectations but is projecting a contrary image. This represents a communications challenge, with the task being to convey the accurate organizational image that happens to correspond with expectations. However, in a different situation the gap may be large when the stakeholders expect one kind of behavior yet the company acts differently. Here, the issue is a strategic problem, which cannot be resolved by communications but must be faced by management.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Crisis Outlook for 1997,” *Institute for Crisis Management* (Louisville, KY: ICM, November 1996) pp. 1-4.

<sup>55</sup> Bartha, “Preventing a high-cost crisis,” pp. 42-53.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

In other words, does the organization need to do a better job of explaining what it is doing, persuade stakeholders that what it is doing is correct, or consider changing what it is doing? When fundamental organizational values are at issue, the management challenge will be more difficult than when simple clarification is required.

Programs designed to respond to external pressures to change policies can run the spectrum from total conformity to stakeholder expectations or perceptions, to “reliance on communications activities to modify external pressures” in ways that support the organization’s position on an issue.<sup>59</sup> A decision to defend a current position and to mount a campaign to persuade others of its legitimacy may not always be successful, but it is straight forward. Most organizations can easily articulate why they behave or believe as they do. However, an organization that recognizes that a change is in order, often has a more difficult task. Different stakeholder groups often promote different agendas. The challenge for organizational leaders is to sort out competing expectations and to determine which have priority over others. The incorporation of incremental changes into standard operating practices may be difficult, but it offers the benefits of reducing organizational rigidity and helps to ensure that stakeholder expectations are being met. The alternative is to invite a full blown crisis producing the pressure to make radical changes.

The media plays an important role in issues management by helping to assign importance to issues, exposing gaps between the organization and its stakeholders, and influencing attitudes about the issues at stake as well as the legitimacy of the organization. According to Bartha, planning an organizational response is constrained by “the degree of importance the public attaches to an issue and the degree of credibility which an organization enjoys in the public's eye when speaking on that issue.”<sup>60</sup> He explains that when public interest is high, “any positioning by a low-credibility organization is likely to

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

be counterproductive.”<sup>61</sup> An organization with a history of disingenuous behavior toward the media, and by extension its stakeholders, is starting from a deficit when gaps exist among expectations, perceptions or practices. To optimize opportunities for effective issues management organizations are better served by employing a consistent approach to the media that builds credibility. Only time and a commitment to reformed behavior can rebuild media trust.

Most experts agree that crisis management planning should culminate in the preparation of written plans which should be reviewed, rehearsed and updated periodically. A major problem for some organizations, especially among those that depend heavily upon contractors to support the planning process, is an attitude that the planning process is a one-time event. Often, the eventual result is a forgotten collection of dusty plans that go unread and unused. An ongoing commitment to crisis management planning and prevention is required.

In summary, the planning process should involve a broad range of organizational players. Preventive activities begin with the development of a relevant knowledge base and the study of environmental trends which have the potential to impact the organization. Vulnerability or risk assessments should be conducted periodically, and preventive activities like issues management should be ongoing. Sensitivity to stakeholder concerns and the maintenance of credibility with the media are critical. Written contingency plans and crisis prevention strategies should be developed. Experts recommend that these plans be dynamic and operationalized by regular reviews, drills, or role playing exercises involving the widest number of organizational members possible.

If preventive efforts fail, as they sometimes will, active crisis management is called for. When a crisis event happens, organizational response should be quick and effective as

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

a result of thorough planning and practicing. Two activities dominate the active crisis management phase: crisis evaluation and crisis communications.

Barton recommends a crisis evaluation model developed by Gerald Meyers and John Holusha to help put a crisis event into perspective and guide management actions. The model, called a Dimension-Control Matrix, assists in determining the amount of risk to the organization as well as the amount of control or influence organizational leadership has over the outcome of the crisis.<sup>62</sup>

<b><u>Control</u></b> Your ability to control/influence the event outcome. (scale of 1 - 10)	<div>10</div> <div><b>C</b></div> <div>Low dimension High control</div> <div>1</div>	<div>10</div> <div><b>B</b></div> <div>High dimension High control</div> <div>10</div>
	<div><b>D</b></div> <div>Low dimension Low control</div> <div>1</div>	<div><b>A</b></div> <div>High dimension Low control</div> <div>1</div>
<b><u>Crisis Dimension</u></b> Size or amount of resources at risk; gravity of the crisis. (scale of 1 - 10)		

The amount of risk or organizational control dictates the level that the crisis is handled at within the organization, and guides the selection of strategies most likely to be useful. By plotting the two criteria presented by a crisis situation -- degree of organizational control and crisis dimension -- an organization can better understand the situation it is facing.

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<sup>62</sup>Barton, *Crisis in Organizations*, p. 58.



An event which falls in quadrant A represents a crisis over which an organization has little control, and which threatens to do severe damage to the organization. The USS Vincennes shootdown of the Iranian Airbus is a fairly good example of this type of crisis. It was a major international incident, the gravity of which was unlikely to be influenced by anything said or done by representatives of the U.S. Navy. This type of crisis dictates a focus on responsible investigation and post-crisis activities such as learning from the crisis event to prevent similar accidents in the future.

Quadrant B type crises, characterized by high control and high dimension, represent serious crises but reflect opportunities for more control over the situation outcome. The Tailhook '91 scandal was this type of case -- it was a very high-stakes case with potential to cause significant damage to the Navy, but leaders had numerous options available to them when the crisis initially broke.

Quadrant C and D crises are both less serious. A quadrant C crisis (high control, low dimension) offers organizational leaders various options and should be relatively easy to manage. By contrast, quadrant D events (low control, low dimension) events offer few options to organizational crisis managers, but also entail fewer risks.

Another important aspect of crisis evaluation involves identifying existing plans which may be appropriate for use in the current situation. Experts recognize that existing plans are unlikely to be a perfect fit, however, they may suggest ideas and actions that could serve as a useful template or checklist.

Crisis communication has received much attention because of its relevance to organizational image. The image an organization portrays through its communication efforts has the potential to exacerbate or mitigate the impact of a crisis event.

Just as in issues management, organizational leaders and spokesmen need to be aware of what type of communications challenge they are facing. Bartha's destinations among stakeholder expectations, perceptions and practices are relevant here. The

characterization of the problem is important, because different types of crises call for different types of messages. Crisis managers need to determine whether an organization is dealing with a lack of data, and need to justify current practices or a more complex conflict of basic values which requires a more strategic approach. To resolve confusion caused by fundamentally conflicting values, communication approaches need to encourage debate and allow for clarification.<sup>63</sup> The dissemination of large amounts of data is more appropriate when stakeholder confusion is based in ignorance instead of conflict over value judgments.

Aside from providing appropriate information or messages for the type of crisis being faced, crisis managers must understand the choices they have concerning the various modes and messages available to communicate with audiences expecting information about a critical event. Crisis communication experts agree that if methods used and messages communicated reflect organizational values out of step with those of their stakeholders, then even the best crisis communications plan will fail.<sup>64</sup>

Crisis managers should have a sophisticated understanding of modern mass media communications. This should include knowledge of how news is produced as well as a grasp of how the mass media influences public opinion. Media can influence public opinion by setting the agenda, signaling the importance of an issue or event, and by attaching values to the subjects covered. It is unusual for a media representative to admit that their coverage influences what people think; however, many will acknowledge that they set the agenda for what people should think about. Drawing attention to issues or events is generally considered to be a function of responsible media. Various news production constraints, such as deadlines and limited time or space in which to tell a story, translate into simplifications which facilitate interpretation. Various biases may also

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ross and Besnson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption," pp. 345-362.

motivate reporters and editors to interpret stories from one perspective or another. Processing information in this way is particularly influential for audiences with little or no opportunity to obtain differing points of view or to verify the accuracy of the information provided.<sup>65</sup>

Countervailing forces that limit media influence include commercial and political pressures, as well as individuals and groups which are able to “capitalize on journalistic norms and routines to create newsworthy events and to shape their coverage.”<sup>66</sup> Taking advantage of these opportunities means that individuals and organizations must be willing to be proactive about public relations as a normal part of business. Crisis communication is facilitated by a widespread understanding of mass media functions and media skills training for individuals likely to interact with the media.

In their study of mass media in modern American society, Jamieson and Campbell point out that the ubiquity of mass media today causes a familiarity that inhibits clear understanding of the mass communication process.<sup>67</sup> Of course, the mass media is not monolithic, and consists of multiple individual organizations at all levels of society. However, many of the most powerful forms of popular media -- high-circulation newspapers and magazines and television and radio stations with large viewing and listening audiences -- share basic motivations and characteristics. Deadlines and competition among news media in the same market provide little time for research and reflection. “Speed and ‘the scoop,’ unfortunately, are prized more than depth and insight.”<sup>68</sup> Organizations must appreciate the rapidity of the news coverage; technological

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<sup>65</sup>Doris A. Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide* (White Plains, NY: Longman, Inc., 1988), p. 264.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>67</sup>Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Interplay of Influence: Mass Media & Their Publics in News, Advertising, Politics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1983), p. 3.

<sup>68</sup>Graber, *Processing the News*, p. 265.

advances enable live coverage from almost anywhere on the planet. The speed of modern coverage has placed more pressure than ever on short news cycles, which are twenty-four hours in most cases. Competition and profits also drive decisions about what and how a story is covered.

Knowing what is likely to be newsworthy is of critical importance for crisis management. Organizations that fail to comprehend what types of events are considered newsworthy can feel blind-sided by media coverage. For example, during a press conference, when the Navy Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Pacific Forces was asked to comment on the rape of an 11 year-old Okinawan girl by three American service men in 1994, Admiral Macke made the following remark: "I think it was absolutely stupid. I have said several times for the price they paid to rent the car they could have had a girl."<sup>69</sup> Clearly, if Admiral Macke did make that comment "several times" before the press conference, no one who heard it convinced him that the statement could be viewed as insensitive and might be problematic for U.S.-Japanese relations. At the press conference, only one of the assembled reporters thought enough of the remark to discuss it with her editor, and only after her organization decided the remark was newsworthy did the rest of the media establishment pick it up and make the remark the international incident it eventually became.

Jamieson and Campbell outline several characteristics of newsworthy events. They are events that involve "real people" with whom an audience might feel a personal connection. Dramatic events which encompass conflict, controversy or violence are likely to attract audiences and therefore are considered newsworthy. These stories are easy to understand and are often matters of community concern. Abstract or theoretical issues are usually not covered unless they can be framed around a concrete event. Novel or strange

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<sup>69</sup> Cassandra Henderson, "Admiral Resigns Over Comments About Rape, Prostitution," *CNN News*, 20 November 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 29 May 1997.



events are often covered because they are interesting and easy for audiences to understand, and they are easy to report. Finally, the media will cover issues that it considers to be of ongoing concern. A particular story may not meet any of the other criteria, but because the media has made a point of updating the public on an issue, coverage can be expected even for relatively minor events.<sup>70</sup>

Jamieson and Campbell also highlight popular themes reflected in American news media, which provide continuity, help frame news stories for easier understanding, and encourage audience identification. These themes include “appearance versus reality” (hypocrisy), “little guys versus big guys,” “good against evil,” “efficiency versus inefficiency,” and “unique versus the routine.”<sup>71</sup> Routine media training can assist organizational leaders to understand how and why the media operate the way they do, and can facilitate more effective crisis communication.

Active crisis management is largely comprised of crisis evaluation and communication. Crisis managers need to comprehend what type of crisis they are dealing with, what degree of damage is possible, and how much control they are likely to have. This will guide communication, and will help prioritize other crisis management activities. Communication should be preceded by an understanding of what stakeholders are experiencing. Misperceptions should be addressed by providing missing information to ensure that stakeholders view the organization and its efforts accurately. Confusion based on unfulfilled expectations require a complex approach which involves dialogue concerning organizational goals and values. Finally, a sophisticated understanding of the modern mass media is necessary to execute optimal external communications strategies. Organizational leaders must understand how and why stories are covered, as well as how the media influences public opinion. Crisis managers should be prepared to work with the

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<sup>70</sup>Jamieson and Campbell, *The Interplay of Influence*, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

mass media to their best advantage, which means adapting to media norms and framing communication in ways that facilitate coverage.

The post-crisis phase can be viewed as a lead-in to the planning and prevention phase. The crisis management team and public relations specialists should conscientiously analyze the crisis and integrate lessons learned into future efforts. Fink suggests going through post-crisis activities even when the crisis happens to another similar organization; crisis evaluation teams should “review, assess, evaluate, rate dissect exactly what happened, how it could have been prevented, and, if it happened again, what -- if anything -- you would do differently. . . . This phase, then, should be viewed as a period of self-assessment, modification, fine-tuning, and even mid-course correction at all levels.”<sup>72</sup> According to Fink, plans should be evaluated and sources of failure should be identified.

The organizational disequilibrium caused by a crisis often provides an opportunity to make significant changes in an organization. Hurst calls this period renewal; he writes, “Renewal is about the restoration of something of value, something important, that has been either lost or forgotten as an organization has grown and prospered. Renewal is about values and the central role that they play in the lives of organizations undergoing renewal.”<sup>73</sup> Hurst’s “back to the future” perspective may be appropriate in some cases, but for many organizations, clinging to certain elements of the past can be counterproductive. Ross and Benson provide a more progressive approach to the post-crisis phase where ethics is emphasized, rather than the wholesale retreat to traditional values. They suggest that leaders create an environment where “members continually reshape corporate standards to preserve ethical goals,” while actively changing organizational culture to eliminate the influence of unethical values.

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<sup>72</sup>Fink, *Crisis Management*, p. 91.

<sup>73</sup>Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal*, p. 1.

Thus, the post-crisis phase involves systematic evaluation and the incorporation of lessons learned into standard operating procedures. It can also be a period of significant organizational change, if leadership is willing and able to turn a critical eye to the subject of organizational culture.

## **2. Organizational Culture**

Surrounding the various organizational crisis management processes, and permeating the organization itself, is organizational culture. Adopting an approach to crisis management that only considers organizational management and communications has the potential for only partial success. An awareness and understanding of how organizational culture contributes to crises or impedes effective crisis management is a critical part of the crisis management process. Organizational culture is an important factor which influences the way organizations prepare for and respond to crises situations, and guides communications during those events.<sup>74</sup>

A basic sociological assumption concerning the notion of culture is that humans are social animals, and that an individual's behavior "is profoundly affected by this association with others."<sup>75</sup> There is little consensus on a specific meaning of the term "culture," let alone "organizational culture;" however, generally accepted definitions include basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of a group, as well as the manifestations of those basic beliefs, such as values.<sup>76</sup> Culture does not cause behavior. Rather, elements of culture "establish an inclination to accomplish an end, while . . . representing conditions in terms of which this end makes sense."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Ross and Benson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption," pp. 345-362.

<sup>75</sup>Charles H. Coats, *Military Sociology: A Study of American Military Institutions and Military Life* (University Park, MI: Social Science Press, 1965), p. 4.

<sup>76</sup>Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985) p. 14. Joanne Martin, *Culture in Organizations: Three Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 47.

<sup>77</sup>C. R. Hinings, L. Thibault, T. Slack, and L. M. Kikulis, "Values and Organizational

Cultures are maintained by the process of socialization. Socialization “refers to the long-range developmental process of human learning in a group setting. . . . [T]he process through which the individual acquires knowledge, values and customs which permit him to live effectively as a member of his society.”<sup>78</sup> Socialization has significance for groups within society, such as those representing specific occupations (e.g., the armed services), as well as to subgroups (e.g., Marines or Sailors, aviators or surface warriors, officers or enlisted troops, career personnel or first-term enlistees) resulting in the evolution of cultures and subcultures. Social control within cultures and subcultures ensures more or less “conformity and adherence to approved values” within a group.<sup>79</sup> Large organizations are often characterized by heterogeneity due to their large and rapidly changing populations which results in variations in the content and emphases of socialization. However, organizations or subgroups with lower turnover and more rigid and comprehensive methods of socialization are more likely to experience stronger and more consistent cultural characteristics.

In the process of socialization, individuals are “exposed to those behavior patterns, values, expectations, and other aspects of both material and nonmaterial culture which are thought to be proper, necessary, or practical by those responsible for [their] socialization.”<sup>80</sup> Dominant social values are crucial to determining social behavior; they guide conceptions of the relative worth of one thing as compared with another, and they are strong motivators of behavior. Dominant social values are influential because they are widely shared within an organization, they persist for long periods, the intensity with which they are held by members of a group make them resistant to violation, and

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Structure.” *Human Relations* 49, no. 7 (July 1996), pp. 885-916. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 2 June 1997.

<sup>78</sup>Coats, *Military Sociology*, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 27.



individuals who are closely associated with or who represent the values are held in high regard.<sup>81</sup> The entrenched nature of dominant social values make them extremely difficult to change.

Identifying social values and using them as guides to predict organizational behavior is problematic for several reasons. Not all group or subgroup members will share these values or believe in them equally. Additionally, values within a group or among subgroups within a larger organization may contradict each other.

Culture influences crisis management in numerous ways. First, the structural aspects of crisis management will only be adopted to the extent that they are culturally consistent. For example, an organization that is secretive and isolated and does not view public affairs as an important function is unlikely to develop crisis communication plans or provide media skills training for its leaders. Certain cultural norms can reduce organizational sensitivity to environmental trends and stakeholder feedback. Organizational culture also guides reactive behavior, which can be extremely prevalent during crisis events.

Karl Weick helps us understand why culture is so influential in crisis management. Organizational culture is heavily reflected in what he calls “sensemaking.” According to Weick, organizations are constantly engaged in sensemaking, an activity he describes as “a developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than a body of knowledge.”<sup>82</sup> Sensemaking is an ongoing, interactive process. For crisis management, sensemaking is particularly relevant -- it happens during all stages of crisis management that fall within the organizational boundary, but it becomes particularly relevant when organizations are

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>82</sup>Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995).



scanning the environment and assessing organizational vulnerability as well as once the crisis event actually occurs.<sup>83</sup>

Weick explains that sensemaking is required when expectations are interrupted. Two things trigger sensemaking -- when the unexpected happens, or when the expected does not happen. Weick says that “organizations will do more or less of sensemaking, depending on the adequacy of the scripts, routines, and recipes already in place.”<sup>84</sup> A crisis management plan is an example of a script or recipe. Various “frames” such as ideologies and paradigms also facilitate sensemaking. These scripts, routines, ideologies and paradigms reflect organizational values and are important manifestations of culture.

Weick describes sensemaking as a process useful for imposing order, counteracting deviations, simplifying, and connecting.<sup>85</sup> Sensemaking is one reason why organizations become rigid and inflexible; Weick surmises “once a tentative explanation has taken hold of our minds, information to the contrary may produce not corrections but elaborations of the explanation.”<sup>86</sup> He equates the phrase “resistance to change” with “resistance of environment.”<sup>87</sup> One particularly important property of sensemaking is that it is “driven by plausibility rather than accuracy,” a sufficient amount is known about what is thought to allow one to move to another activity.<sup>88</sup>

Sensemaking may influence organizational vulnerability assessments by distorting new data or trends to fit existing cultural paradigms. When external signals confirm preconceived ideas about organizational health, then organizations are saved from dealing with complex problems which might require change. When a crisis event occurs,

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

sensemaking is constrained by a limited ability to focus on all aspects of the event, mostly because of the time pressures associated with crises, but also because of the cognitive limits of the crisis management team. So during a crisis, fewer cues are available for use in sensemaking. The result is an increased potential for heightened “cognitive inefficiency” if the optimal level of focus is exceeded.<sup>89</sup> Weick states that “Normally, to forestall regression and incompetence in the face of high arousal, people practice complex routines over and over so their tasks become simpler and buffered better against loss of use and performance decrement.”<sup>90</sup> However, these efforts can have mixed results if behavior scripts are inappropriate for the crisis at hand.

“Frames,” such as ideologies or paradigms, provide structure for sensemaking. Weick describes ideologies as “a set of decision premises that give structure to nonroutine work,” and paradigms as consisting of “standard operating procedures, shared definitions of the environment, and the agreed-upon system of power and authority.”<sup>91</sup> He argues that these concepts facilitate comprehension and meaning in social situations. They act to provide structure for simplifying perceptions. This simplification may be a necessary part of responding to an organizational crisis, and to the extent that they are available, ideologies, paradigms, scripts and routines will influence decision making and organizational behavior.

One public relations executive concludes, “People who behave the best during a crisis are not those with the best plan, but those who are value-driven. . . . While tactical notions are very important in dealing with a crisis, values provide a kind of enduring logic that lends coherence to an organization's actions.”<sup>92</sup> The bottom line is that practices

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>92</sup>John Scanlon quoted by Fitzpatrick, “Ten Guidelines for Reducing Legal Risks in Crisis Management,” pp. 33-38.

based on culturally consistent ethical principles are more effective than those founded on unethical or counterproductive cultural characteristics.

In a recent article, Ross and Benson highlight the fact that when an organization suffers from deeply rooted ethical conflicts “effective damage control require[s] more than cosmetic public relations efforts.”<sup>93</sup> Ross and Benson examine the case of the Sundstrand Corporation, a major defense contractor was found guilty of federal fraud charges. This finding eventually led to the largest financial judgment ever awarded against a defense contractor.<sup>94</sup> In this case, prohibited practices thrived in the organization without consequence, and the constraining influence of official policies was undermined as the practices became the expected behaviors of organizational members.

Ross and Benson suggest a four phase model “for diagnosing sources of ethical misconduct and dealing with the consequences.”<sup>95</sup> The four phases are rebellion against external ethical standards, recrimination against persecutors, retreat from conflict, and restoration of commitment to ethical conduct. Rebellion is provoked by a combination of cultural factors and ethical ambiguity within the environment. Cultural factors include reward structures and norms which legitimize practices. Continued commitment to unethical behavior serves as a breeding ground for crises situations brought on by a failure to adapt to stakeholder expectations.

Recrimination is stimulated by cultural rigidity. As a crisis unfolds, a common organizational response is refusal to accept responsibility. This denial can take be explicit, but can also take the form of silence on the issue at hand. This silence translates into a policy of media avoidance, with severe penalties levied against those who violate the policy. A siege mentality results from a culture in which leaders deny responsibility and

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<sup>93</sup>Ross and Benson, “Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption,” pp. 345-362.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

are unwilling to talk openly about ways to solve the problems. Recrimination against those attempting to impose ethical standards on the organization is not constructive, and as long as it continues, it is unlikely that the negative cultural values which initiated the crisis in the first place will be identified and dealt with.

As culturally driven crisis management strategies fail to solve problems, leaders will launch a sudden strategic retreat in the interest of damage control and short-term rewards. Without admitting full responsibility, and often while blaming the problems on external sources, an organization may agree to limited demands for corrective action in order to get out of the headlines and restore its public image as quickly as possible. Leaders continue to restrict both internal and external communication concerning the crisis.

The last phase is ethical restoration through cultural change. When leaders come to the conclusion that restoration of public trust can only be achieved by an honest commitment to ethical conduct as a primary value, then lasting crisis resolution can be achieved. Demonstrated commitment to the desired change is required by top leadership; this may require the installation of new leaders. Open internal and external communication is necessary. While an open and proactive relationship with the media may not “inoculate” an organization from negative coverage, it encourages balanced reporting in the case of future problems. Employee advocacy is also required. This advocacy includes ongoing ethical training programs and a willingness to avoid blaming individuals for institutional problems in order to provide a secure internal environment for employee feedback during the change. Values may need to be reprioritized, such as prizing ethical conduct over efficiency.

### **3. Summary**

The key to effective crisis management is an organizational culture which institutionalizes the use of ethical and constructive practices, and which encourages the



application of appropriate ideologies and paradigms. Weick believes that a crisis event has the capacity to stimulate organizational innovation; though much smaller events over time can also trigger changes in the way organizations conduct sensemaking.<sup>96</sup>

Several authors have indicated that if problematic cultural elements are acknowledged and addressed at the same time that optimal crisis management strategies are employed, then the negative effects of crisis events may be mitigated and long-term organizational health may even be improved.<sup>97</sup> The greatest challenge to organizational leaders is in becoming conscious of organizational culture and implementing meaningful reforms for long-term change.

There is a degree of expert consensus regarding optimal crisis management practices. The crisis management process can be broken down into three phases: pre-crisis, active crisis management, and the post-crisis phase. During the pre-crisis phase, a team approach is key to effective crisis prevention. Vulnerability assessments and formal plans are enriched by efforts that consider multiple perspectives. Routine training and crisis response rehearsals involving large segments of the organization help enable organizational members identify crisis warning signs and contribute to effective crisis management. Dynamic issues management and other prevention efforts are important, and they rely on a sophisticated understanding of the modern mass media. When crises occur, systematic analysis of crises helps leaders avoid counterproductive, knee-jerk reactions by instilling deeper understanding of what the problem is: stakeholder misperceptions or organizational practices. As one crisis comes to a close, the formal integration of lessons learned helps prevent similar crises in the future. Once again, this should be a team effort.

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<sup>96</sup>Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, p. 85.

<sup>97</sup>Ross and Benson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption," pp. 345-362.



In addition to practices and policies, knowledge of an organization's culture is required to fully understand individual cases of crisis management. Organizations maintain culture through the process of socialization. Socialization is where new members are exposed to expectations, behaviors, and values that they should uphold to be successful in the group. Culture influences behavior, especially during crises. Culturally consistent frames and paradigms help organizations simplify their environments and provide short-cuts for understanding problems. These mechanisms are necessary and sometimes helpful, however, they can also cause organizational rigidity and a resistance to change.

To begin to understand an organization's culture, dominant social values must be identified. Although defining dominant social values is difficult and using them as guides to predict organizational behavior is problematic, the process is necessary for effective crisis management. To the extent that meaningful, long-term organizational change is required, culture must be examined.



#### IV. NAVY CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CULTURE

Navy instructions are used to establish programs and policies throughout the organization. A review of Navy instructions related to crisis management reveals that the Navy defines organizational crises narrowly, and that detailed planning and organizing activities are prescribed for crises that meet this narrow definition. Navy public affairs guidance reflects this limited definition of what constitutes an organizational crisis. The Secretary of the Navy recommends detailed planning and organizing activities for the contingencies anticipated by the instruction. Although not specifically identified as crisis management activities, many of the routine practices advocated by Navy public affairs policy encourage beneficial communication practices. Overall, Navy crisis response directives show an appreciation for the need to plan and prepare for crises; however, they are inadequate for the full range of crisis management challenges faced by the service. A look at the relevant directives will reveal specific weaknesses.

##### 1. Primary Guides for Navy Crisis Management

There are three headquarters-level instructions which guide Navy crisis response activities, and one that provides public affairs guidance. The first, Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) Instruction 3006.1, guides the implementation of the Navy Crisis Response Preparedness Program. The purpose of this program is to “provide for adequate planning, management and coordination of human services that are required to support groups of individuals who suffer the effects of mass casualty, crisis, or disaster situations.”<sup>98</sup> This program recognizes the need to prepare for crises prior to their occurrence to facilitate the coordination of emergency services such as medical care, financial assistance, mental

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<sup>98</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Secretary of the Navy, *SECNAV Instruction 3006.1: Secretary of the Navy Crisis Response Preparedness Program* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of the Navy, 14 February 1991), p. A-1.

health and spiritual counseling, legal assistance and transportation. Although not an exhaustive list, the instruction names “mass casualty incidents or accidents, military conflict, terrorist attacks or threats, destructive weather, natural disasters, repatriation and mobilization” as scenarios where well planned and coordinated crisis response is required.<sup>99</sup> Public affairs functions are mentioned, but there is no elaboration regarding specific public affairs activities. The focus of the program is on the identification and coordination of resources required to carry out the assigned mission (e.g., the evacuation of civilians from the site of an erupting volcano or area of severe flooding, the rapid repatriation of military dependents from bases deemed to be too dangerous for their continued presence) and provision of emergency services to victims, family members and crisis response personnel. The program calls for the development of detailed written plans, periodic exercises, and reviews.

SECNAV Instruction 3006.1 suffers from several shortcomings. It defines crises too narrowly. Events which have proven to be image-damaging crises for the Navy during the last decade are not addressed by this instruction. A significant number of Navy organizational crises since 1990 have been associated with human resource issues (especially sexual harassment and gender integration), human error or unethical behavior. Environmental issues are also increasingly attracting media attention for many types of organizations. The Institute For Crisis Management (ICM), a for-profit research-based consulting firm specializing in crisis communication, reports that the crises that occur “are being covered far more intensely by the news media, and therefore are much more damaging to organizations in crisis.”<sup>100</sup> Effective crisis management depends on a sufficiently broad definition of crisis to allow for adequate vulnerability assessments, planning and prevention activities.

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>“Crisis Outlook for 1997,” p. 3

SECNAV Instruction 3006.1 is cursory, and not particularly helpful to commands attempting to establish local level crisis response programs. The document is only three pages long. It is lacking totally in specific implementation directions or annexes which demonstrate how a program might be implemented and what a crisis response plan should look like.

The Navy Civil Emergency Program, or Disaster Preparedness Manual, as it is often called, is promulgated in OPNAV Instruction 3440.16C. Its purpose is “to provide Navy policy, planning guidance, operational structure, and assignment of responsibilities” in the case of a civil emergency. Civil emergencies are defined as “any domestic natural or manmade disaster or emergency that causes or could cause substantial harm to the population or infrastructure.”<sup>101</sup> The goals of any Navy response effort to a civil emergency include saving lives, protecting property, preventing human suffering, and restoring Navy mission capabilities. The types of contingencies addressed by this directive are flood relief, destructive weather, wildfire assistance, earthquake relief, postal augmentation, live ordnance assistance, oil spill cleanup, and civil disturbances to include terrorist attacks.

OPNAV Instruction 3440.16C is detailed. It assigns responsibilities, orders the development and maintenance of written plans, establishes various crisis response teams, and directs the conduct of periodic exercises. However, public affairs functions are ignored entirely, and guidance concerning the specific form and substance of plans is lacking.

Navy Medical Command (NAVMEDCOM) Instruction 3440.4, entitled Activity Disaster Preparedness Plans and Material for Disaster Preparedness Teams, augments

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<sup>101</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, *OPNAV Instruction 3440.16C: Navy Civil Emergency Management Program* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 10 March 1995), p. 1.



OPNAV Instruction 3440.16C. It focuses only on the medical component of disaster response. This instruction provides “policy, planning, guidance, operational structure, and assigns responsibilities” for disaster preparedness.<sup>102</sup> NAVMEDCOM Instruction 3440.4 also addresses a fairly narrow class of events (mass casualty situations); however, it provides much better guidance for local commanders to assist in program implementation. The instruction provides specific directives concerning coordination with line disaster preparedness officials, the conduct of semi-annual exercises, the establishment and function of evaluation teams, training, and the availability of augmentation teams. Enclosures to the instruction include lists defining terms and suggesting types of disaster response teams, as well as proposals for disaster plan annexes and checklists. One helpful enclosure is an extensive list of questions to help commanders identify weaknesses in their disaster plans and to ensure that plans are comprehensive. Still, no comprehensive disaster preparedness plan blueprint is provided. Also, the need for a public affairs annex is noted, but it is not included in the instruction.

Although these three instructions suffer from limitations, they reveal that when confronting certain types of events, the Navy recognizes the need for a well planned, rehearsed, and coordinated response. Their major weakness is the neglect of relevant public affairs activities. SECNAV Instruction 5729.44A, Department of the Navy Public Affairs Policy and Regulations, is a massive tome designed to provide comprehensive guidance for all Navy public affairs activities. A chapter devoted to contingency response activities is included in this instruction. The Navy Chief of Information (CHINFO) also disseminates annual public affairs guidance to the fleet in the form of a strategy “playbook.”

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<sup>102</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Commander, Naval Medical Command, *NAVMEDCOM Instruction 3440.4: Activity Disaster Preparedness Plans and Material for Disaster Preparedness Teams* (Washington, DC: Office of the Commander, Naval Medical Command, 28 March 1989), p. 1.

Navy public affairs priorities include informing the public about “the Navy as an instrument of national policy and security, . . . Navy operations and programs, [and] . . . the responsibilities and activities of naval personnel as United States Citizens.”<sup>103</sup> SECNAV Instruction 5720.44A emphasizes the role of public affairs in communicating positive messages about the Navy’s contributions to the execution of the national security strategy. The program is based upon the principles that the public has a right to be informed concerning national defense, and that “no information is to be classified solely because disclosure might result in criticism of the Department of Defense.”

The instruction says that foremost public affairs concerns are that information be factual and that media treatment be fair and equitable. In addition, it directs that adverse information be released candidly and rapidly for ethical and practical reasons:

It is the policy of the Department of the Navy to disseminate fully, candidly and promptly information on accidents, disasters, incidents and any other emergent situations of intense public interest unless such a release would compromise national security. History demonstrates that news of serious accidents, disasters and other emergencies finds its way into the press regardless of whether the affected organization releases the information. News predicated on rumor or hearsay rather than official sources is usually inaccurate or exaggerated. Failure to release official information on an event of intense public interest may be interpreted to mean that the organization is concealing embarrassing or potentially damaging facts. This can result in prolonged efforts by the press to extricate facts, thus keeping the event before the public eye for an undue length of time. If news of an accident or incident is released by the Navy or Marine Corps rapidly and fully, news media coverage is generally more straightforward and less likely to remain of high interest to news media.<sup>104</sup>

This policy statement makes clear that, at least theoretically, Navy leadership understands the need for effective crisis communication to address problems, to minimize any negative

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<sup>103</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Secretary of the Navy, *SECNAV Instruction 5720.44A: Department of the Navy Public Affairs Policy and Regulations* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of the Navy, 3 June 1987), p. 1-1.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3-14.

impact, and to prevent further damage as a result of delays or dishonesty. This approach to organizational communication, especially during a crisis, is fully consistent with recommended crisis management practices discussed in the previous chapter.

Chapter Eight of SECNAV Instruction 5720.44A is devoted to guidance on contingencies. The chapter is broken down into specific directive for five types of contingencies: nuclear weapons accidents, incidents involving toxic waste, terrorist threats and attacks, combat/wartime public affairs, and general accident response. Each section addresses the need for planning, exercises, preparatory measures, and crisis response actions during and subsequent to a crisis. Public affairs goals during an emergency include safeguarding personnel and classified information, ensuring that civilian leaders are provided with timely and accurate information to facilitate their decision making, retaining “public confidence in the command, the service and the Department of Defense,” respecting the privacy of personnel and the welfare of next of kin, and honoring “the right of the public to be informed rapidly and accurately of Navy and Marine Corps accidents and incidents and the Services’ response in emergencies and other contingencies.”<sup>105</sup>

Together with information scattered throughout other chapters, Chapter Eight directs many practices advocated by civilian crisis communication experts. Although the overall emphasis is on getting the Navy message out, PAOs are expected to dedicate some effort to scanning the environment and understanding the public’s image of the Navy. In its section on understanding and analyzing mass media, the instruction notes that PAOs must “obtain and evaluate audience feedback, then refine the media or the message as necessary.”<sup>106</sup> Planning for contingencies is emphasized, as is the establishment of special public affairs organizations to handle emergencies which generate intense public interest.

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 8-2.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 3-20a.

Detailed public affairs rehearsal is called for during regular disaster preparedness exercises.

Chapter Eight demonstrates that for certain types of events the Navy thinks strategically about crisis management. However, this SECNAV Instruction 5720.44 A suffers from some weaknesses. The definition of contingency (which is used interchangeably with crisis in the public affairs instruction) is narrow. The types of Navy image-damaging events experienced in recent years are not addressed. Explicit issues management activities are lacking. Additionally, post-crisis evaluation appears to be limited to internal public affairs use as a training tool. Also, prevention activities are limited. They are geared toward supporting internal safety programs and establishing networks for crisis communication. More active, externally oriented public affairs activities are encouraged by the annual playbooks.

Navy public affairs playbooks provide annual thematic guidance for all Navy leaders. The playbooks are not directive in nature, but recommend proven public affairs strategies and encourage the use of various communication methods. Playbooks are “written from the understanding that there are no magic formulas for success in public affairs. . . . Good public affairs is a combination of foresight, information, tact, teamwork timing, and most of all, preparation.”<sup>107</sup> The maintenance of a Navy institutional image worthy of respect is a stated goal of the most recent playbook published in 1996.

With slight variations from year to year, the themes promoted by the playbooks are similar. The message to external audiences is that today’s high quality Navy is vital to accomplishing national security objectives, and that the Navy works hard to serve its customers, U.S. taxpayers. Internal audiences are reminded that the “the Navy takes care of its own.” Additionally, internal audiences are educated about ethical behavior and the

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<sup>107</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Chief of Information, *Playbook '96* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Information, 1996), p. 4.



“Navy Core Values” -- honor, courage, and commitment. The emphasis on ethics and Navy Core Values may be a reaction to the Navy’s troubles in the 1990s, although the playbook authors do not provide explanations for theme selections.

These documents never mention crisis management (except in an operational sense). They are dedicated to daily public affairs activities, many of which contribute to crisis prevention. Playbooks suggest specific target audiences, communication strategies and modern tools and resources available to support public affairs efforts. *Playbook ‘96* notes that “evaluation and feedback are probably the most neglected aspects of public affairs planning.”<sup>108</sup> Feedback mechanisms are stressed in all playbooks; commands are encouraged to use public opinion polls and focus groups, in addition to other methods of obtaining information regarding issues of concern to various audiences. According to the playbooks, feedback should also be used to measure the success of Navy public affairs efforts. The playbooks represent a concerted effort to guide and motivate Navy command officials to undertake proactive and thoughtful public affairs programs. In contrast to the long and dry public affairs instruction, the playbooks are short, well written, up-beat documents. To the extent that they are read by the intended audience (unit leaders) and public affairs professionals, they might encourage crisis prevention activities like issues management.

In summary, the Navy crisis response programs reflect a narrow conception of what constitutes organizational crises. The types of problems which have damaged the Navy’s public image over the last decade are not addressed by these programs. The same requirements for well developed plans, periodic exercises and post-crisis review activities that the Navy applies to accidents or natural disasters could be applied to a broader range of events. Additionally, the full range of possible public affairs involvement with crisis

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 5.



management is not well articulated in current directives. To the extent that Navy public affairs policies and recommended practices contribute to effective crisis management, they are limited by pervasive negative attitudes toward the media. An examination of Navy organizational culture can suggest some reasons why Navy policy is inadequate to the full range of crises experienced by the organization, and suggest why the implementation of directives is not sufficient to ensure that Navy behavior is optimal during a crisis.

## **2. Navy Organizational Culture**

Each of the armed services has its own unique organizational culture; one that serves as a distinct American subculture. Despite unique characteristics, they share many commonalities, more than among most occupational groups. To understand the nature of Navy culture, it is necessary to describe the culture of American society, and compare it to basic elements of military culture. Military culture and American culture necessarily diverge. Because of this, there is always going to be the potential for a value based military image crisis. The Navy, with the service culture perhaps farthest away from societal values, is probably most in need of some form of public affairs or crisis management mechanisms to head off or deal with situations where fundamental values are clashing. Part of this process involves a frank recognition of where the Navy and public values are different.

Sociologists Charles Coats and Roland Pellegrin suggest a short list of the dominate values of American society which form the basis for culture in the United States. In their comparison, Coats and Pellegrin derive the basic elements of American culture from the American canon, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They argue that dominant American social values include the following:<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Coats and Pellegrin, *Military Sociology*, pp. 29-32. Although more recent writings about military or American culture are available, most that I could find were focused on wartime issues, and none were as explicit in their comparison of the two basic cultures as Coats and Pellegrin were in 1965. The dominant social values that underpin culture are

- Equality, based on the religious concept of individuals being “equal before God.” Equality is the absence of restrictions placed on opportunity, it is not a condition. Social equality is characterized by a lack of rigid class distinctions among individuals; it emphasizes informal relationships.
- Freedom, meaning the absence of restraints. Americans reject arbitrary or unduly harsh restrictions of freedom; however, most recognize that some limitations of freedom are required for a safe and orderly society.
- Individual worth and individualism. This value is related to both equality and freedom. Equality and freedom make sense only to the extent that the worth of the individual is recognized. This provides justification for the protection of an individual’s rights.
- Patriotism. In the United States, patriotism is expressed in terms of the superiority of the American way of life. American society is unmilitaristic, a cultural characteristic adopted from colonial England. So Americans can be said to have devotion to a way of life that does not involve militarism. This dislike for militarism and strong nationalism is one reason why American patriotism tends to be an ambiguous concept.
- Democracy. There is lack of agreement as to what democracy means in America. In general, Americans embrace the concept of majority rule, with protection of minority rights, based upon fair representation and the expression of public will.
- Progress and an orientation toward the future. “Americans have a long and abiding faith in the perfectibility of their institutions,” according to Coats and Pellegrin. Dominant social values set very high standards for social interaction, and although few, if any, values are fully realized, they provide a direction for future efforts. Unlike other societies, “change is viewed as natural, necessary, and of positive consequence.”

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entrenched and lasting; for this reason, information that is over thirty years old is still relevant today.

Americans are characterized by “a shared future but not a common history.”<sup>110</sup> This, together with the colonial rejection of Old World traditions in favor of experimentalism, especially during the first century of American existence, led to a general American apathy toward tradition, which to some extent exists today.

- Efficiency, practicality, and rationality. These values translate into a tendency toward short-range thinking and the pursuit of technological innovation. Coats and Pellegrin conclude that Americans “concentrate far less on tradition, aesthetics, and philosophical or other-worldly concerns” than other developed societies.
- Work activity. The primacy of occupational goals in America is rooted in the Protestant ethic. Success and work are both highly valued, and are used to help measure achievement and personal worth within society.

American military cultural values do not mirror American cultural values outlined by Coats and Pellegrin, and in some cases, they are antithetical to them. Dominant military values have evolved in support of military institutions and the effective execution of military missions. Although Americans may not embrace military values or practices, the services are among the most highly regarded American institutions, and American military heroes as well as certain military rituals, such as parades, have long been popular with civilians. Often, American civilian heroes have come to embody the same positive traits associated with military leaders. These include “manly virtues,” such as bravery, toughness, courage and an adventurous spirit.<sup>111</sup> An analysis of how military values relate to those of American society provided by Coats and Pellegrin, is summarized below:<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>111</sup>Coats and Pellegrin, *Military Sociology*, p. 41.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

- Equality. In the military, formal rank structures legitimize the inequality of both privileges and obligations. Detailed military ritual have been developed to ensure that this inequality is legitimized and observed throughout the armed services. Theoretically, equal opportunity exists among individuals sharing the same rank or position.
- Freedom. Pervasive, formal social controls are a way of life in the U.S. military. Once an individual is enlisted or commissioned in one of the armed services, he or she expects that major life choices which other Americans make for themselves, such as what job to perform, what to wear and where to live, will largely be dictated by military leaders. Coats and Pellegrin conclude that lack of interest in military service among Americans “stems as much from a repugnance for excessive controls as from any other factor.”
- Individual worth in the military. The armed forces recognize individuals only to the extent that they contribute to group goals and represent dominant military values. The services prize teamwork, and hold group goals and interests far superior to those of the individual. In general, individualism is discouraged.
- Patriotism. American military personnel often associate patriotism with militarism -- an association not embraced by American society.
- Democracy. Historically, “It was believed that military leaders were aristocratic or otherwise undemocratic in orientation and were thereby inherently hostile to republican government.”<sup>113</sup> Whether or not this is true today, American military leaders consider the practice of democracy within the armed services to be inconsistent with the functions of military organizations. Relatively few individuals at the top levels of organizations are involved in important decision making. The military mind

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 25.



has been associated with intolerance, inflexibility, and “impatience with discussions and debate as well as other democratic procedures.”<sup>114</sup>

- Progress. The armed services are not considered to be progressive institutions. At their inception, the United States Army and Navy were patterned after Western European militaries, especially that of Great Britain. By contrast, during this same period, revolutionary Americans were actively rejecting Old World traditions. Although military technological innovation has had spill-over benefits for American society, military progress is not necessarily highly valued by Americans. Military research and development expenditures are often viewed as being excessive and reckless.
- Efficiency, practicality and rationality. Rigid military processes are often criticized as wasteful and inept, especially during peacetime.
- Work. Coats and Pellegrin note that Americans have a positive image of the military work ethic when forces are actively engaged in operations; however, less favorable stereotyped conceptions influence opinions at other times. Characters such as Gomer Pile, Beetle Bailey or those found in the television show MASH represent the image of military members as socially unfit or disinclined to productive work. The perception persists that the armed forces are a haven for individuals without other options. Except for those top level military leaders, military careers are not usually associated with success.

The military self-image is vastly different from the predominant image of the military among the American public. Military personnel view themselves as self-sacrificing patriots, who are highly trained and educated, and who possess special knowledge as a result of unique experiences. Military professionals reject the idea that the services are

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 43.



constrained by ritual and tradition, arguing that these are just tools used to forge group loyalty and organizational solidarity. Any notion of military resistance to progress is denied.<sup>115</sup> Historically, problems with morale and discipline within American military institutions have been blamed on the “soft civilian society from which the enlisted came.”<sup>116</sup> This subjective view is characterized by an unwillingness to accept both the positive and negative ramifications of military culture.

American fear of strong military organizations is a consistent theme in U.S. history. According to Coats and Pellegrin, American military institutions have always been pressured to change in ways that better reflect dominant American social values. Incremental changes have moved the service cultures in this direction, but organizational resistance has been significant. Although military members support American values, “the traditional characteristics of military organization have been perpetuated because our military leaders have considered them mandatory, in view of the functions and goals which military forces have.”<sup>117</sup> Strictly stratified hierarchical structures, formal norms of social interaction based on customs and traditions have been deemed necessary to carry out warfare. These military customs and traditions “are powerful determinants of shared value orientations.”<sup>118</sup> As a result of strong military adherence to traditions and customs, many changes have been forced upon the services by political leaders and public will.

How does military culture become so strong and enduring? According to Coats and Pellegrin, “formal military education is, of course, the principal means of socializing the would-be military professional. While the military culture is rooted, nourished and

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

transmitted in the service academies, . . . its influence pervades private military schools as well as the ROTC programs in civilian colleges and universities.”<sup>119</sup>

Socialization in the services begins with intense periods of indoctrination dedicated to the teaching of both formal and informal social norms. Both leaders and peers are responsible for enforcing formal aspects of socialization. Informal social systems exist at all levels of the military, just as they do in any formal organization. They provide a means for accomplishing “informally, and outside of official channels, organizational missions and goals.”<sup>120</sup> While these informal structures are not acknowledged officially, they are firmly established, persist through many changes in personnel, and compel behavior and attitudes among the group membership. Close proximity to other group members, such as at boot camp or on a ship, increases the likelihood that strong social systems will develop. Peers become largely responsible for ensuring that informal norms are communicated and enforced in military organizations:

When a newcomer challenges existing group customs the other members are likely to close ranks and make it unmistakably clear to him that if he wishes to be a member of the ‘gang’ he must abide by their informal rules. If he wishes to earn their respect and confidence he must like the thugs they like, gripe about the things they gripe about, and demonstrate his willingness and eagerness to learn the folkways, the unique sub-culture of the new military group he has entered.<sup>121</sup>

For the services, the recruitment and indoctrination of personnel is a continuous process during which formal and informal norms are consciously passed down and strictly enforced. The constant nature of the socialization and the rigidity of the norms means that the norms are changed very slowly and with conscious effort.

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

Norms of group behavior learned during initial training and education are reinforced throughout military careers. As opposed to most occupations where significant lateral movement of personnel among organizations (and therefore among organizational cultures) occurs, to include top leadership, military organizations grow their leaders from the bottom up in the environment of a single organizational culture.

Carl Builder likens service cultures to personalities that are difficult to change. He writes that these personalities

are the products of the culture and acculturation of hundreds of thousands of people, whose leadership requires decades of institutional experience, and whose behavior is continuously reinforced by social and professional incentives. . . Since people are more likely to associate themselves with an institution for positive rather than negative reasons, a large reservoir of restorative attitudes always maintains those values which originally attracted the institution's membership. . . Significant rapid change is almost certain to be imposed from the outside and vigorously resisted from the inside.<sup>122</sup>

Service cultures are unusually strong and well entrenched. The notions of what constitutes specific elements of individual service cultures are controversial. However, Builder and others have drawn conclusions concerning Navy culture based on the study of naval personnel, practices and institutions.

In describing Navy culture, Builder says that as an institution, the Navy “worships” at the altar of tradition, more so than any of the other services. He argues that the value placed on tradition greatly influences the way the Navy behaves, especially when it is under pressure to change:

This reverence for tradition in the U.S. Navy has continued right to the present, not just in pomp or display, but in the Navy's approach to almost every action from eating to fighting . . . In tradition, the Navy finds a secure anchor for the institution against the dangers it must face. If in

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<sup>122</sup>Builder, *The Masks of War*, p. 38-39.

doubt, or confronted with a changing environment, the Navy looks to its traditions to keep it safe.<sup>123</sup>

Builder suggests that a look at the decor of each service chief's corridor in the Pentagon reflects service self images. Navy tradition reflects an elite, conservative, ethos. Of the Navy's corridor, he writes, "The whole effect is one of a stuffy British men's club . . . Truly, one gets the message that it is an institution with stability, with a history and a rich set of traditions. It is a place for gentlemen, properly attired, to meet and decide the fate of empires." In addition, he believes that "the Navy is supremely confident in its legitimacy," an attitude which reinforces its resistance to change.<sup>124</sup> This dedication to tradition and organized resistance to change has important implications for modern civil-military relations.

Civilian control of the military is fundamental to American notions of civil-military relations, yet recent political decisions which civilian political leaders have attempted to impose on the military -- notably those related to sexual orientation and gender integration in the services -- have been met with strong resistance.<sup>125</sup> Some analysts argue that this resistance indicates that America is in the midst of a crisis with implications for the long-term stability of the democracy. Even authors who do not think a crisis exists tend to acknowledge that "an ongoing adjustment in U.S. civil-military relations is clearly taking place."<sup>126</sup> The implications of this crisis or adjustment are unclear. In 1992 I. Lewis Libby, then Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, acknowledged the

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>125</sup>Don M. Snider and Miranda A. Carlton-Carew, eds., *U.S. Civil-Military Relations: In Crisis or Transition?* (Washington, DC: The Center For Strategic and International Studies, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>126</sup>Douglas Johnson and Steven Metz, "Civil-Military Relations in the United States: The State of the Debate," *The Washington Quarterly*, 18, no. 1 (Winter 1995), p. 194. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.



complexity of modern American civil-military relations in a speech to the Heritage Foundation: "The issue is not simply one of placing the military within the framework of civil society. It also involves structuring civil-military relations in such a way that produces an effective military."<sup>127</sup>

Some degree of contradiction between civilian and military cultures may be considered necessary for a healthy American society, at the same time, extreme differences can threaten civil-military stability. In his discussion of military legitimacy, Rudolph Barnes writes:

Most civilians value individual rights and liberty above order and discipline, while the opposite is true for military personnel. All military officers have sworn allegiance to the Constitution, but their perspectives of duty and loyalty are shaped by the demands of an authoritarian military organization and its mission, where there is little tolerance of individual rights and liberty. Conflicting values can be expected; and while such conflicts have little effect in wartime, they can undermine civil-military relations. . . .<sup>128</sup>

Barnes cites "Tailhook '91" as an example of a dangerous clash of cultures: "The 'Tailhook' scandal involved allegations of gross sexual harassment by Navy aviators during a convention at Las Vegas. The allegations reflected traditional 'macho' military values clearly out of sync with civilian values and the changing role of women in the military."<sup>129</sup> Barnes notes that the isolation of the American military from the wider society inhibits the civil-military adjustment.<sup>130</sup> As a generation of political leaders with little military experience ascends to power across the nation, several other factors are working to widen the separation between civilians and the military, most significantly the

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<sup>127</sup>I. Lewis Libby, "American Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations and Democracy," *Heritage Foundation Reports*, no. 433 (29 October, 1992), p. 1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 15 April 1997.

<sup>128</sup>Rudolph C. Barnes Jr., *Military Legitimacy: Might and Right in the New Millennium* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.



ongoing closure of military bases and the downsizing of the services. The threatened reduction in reserve components could further remove day-to-day contact between the military and the public they serve.

How does the Navy culture described above hinder the Navy's ability to manage crises effectively? Traditional ways of thinking and of doing things are valued and encouraged as leaders advance through their careers. Those making the decisions during crises are often those most affected by a strong organizational culture -- they have learned to operate successfully within it for many years. The highest Navy tradition is that of the captain at sea where autonomy reigns supreme and decisions go unquestioned. Even if this image is dated, it is still revered. On shore, where many of the Navy's problems have occurred, this image is especially counterproductive.

Organizational isolation inhibits all of the activities associated with the preventive phase of crisis management. The Navy focus is internal and operational; there is little concern for trends in the wider society. Formal military protocol combined with a strong appreciation for group loyalty inhibit the flow of information to top decision makers before and during crises. Under the pressure of an actual crisis situation, those who see things differently from leaders or other decision makers may be viewed as hindrances rather than as team players supporting of the organization while it is "under attack."

Protection of the organization and its traditions is paramount for the Navy, and this priority directly opposes honest self-analysis and self-criticism. Even when Navy leaders are aware of problems within the organization, they are extremely hesitant to admit them to outsiders. To avoid the imposition of changes from outsiders, denial is a common strategy when evidence of serious problems exist. Similarly, it discourages post-crisis activities which might contribute to needed organizational change and crisis prevention. Within this organizational culture, it is unlikely that the Navy prepares itself well to

effectively manage the image damaging types of crises from which it has suffered most during the last decade.

If Barnes and Builder are both correct, then civil-military struggle will continue -- especially for the Navy -- for the foreseeable future. How does this struggle manifest itself in crises? To help illustrate how culture relates to crisis management, and to gain insight as to how difficult culture is to change, the next chapter will examine the series of crises experienced by the Naval Academy during the 1990s.

## V. THE U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY: A CASE STUDY

A 1997 panel report on professional military education by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) concluded that service academies are crucial to the American armed forces because they perpetuate enduring service values. According to the report, each service academy “represents a crucible in which many future officers are immersed fully for the first time in the traditions, cultures, and demands of the U.S. military.”<sup>131</sup> The CSIS report describes service academy graduates as “extremely high-quality officers, steeped in the traditions and culture of their particular service and molded to a military ideal to an extent not possible in a part-time ROTC program.”<sup>132</sup> In explaining why service academy standards are high, the report says that “because of the elite nature and mission of the service academies, the American public holds them to a higher standard, an exalted expectation that the academies themselves encourage.”<sup>133</sup>

The CSIS panel, chaired by former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, recognized that service academies have experienced trouble living up to this “exalted expectation” in recent years:

The reputation of the academies . . . has been undermined in recent years by a string of scandals, including incidents of cheating, drug abuse, theft, sexual harassment, rape, and even alleged murder. Considering service academy standards, each incident is extremely serious -- but not representative. Although it is not clear that the incidence of such misconduct actually has risen in any quantitative sense, the scandals have caused many observers to wonder whether the ethical compass at the academies is wavering from true north.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>*Professional Military Education: An Asset for Peace and Progress: A Report of the CSIS Study Group on Professional Military Education*, ed. Bill Taylor (Washington, D. C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.

Over the last decade, the Naval Academy has suffered from all of the above listed scandals, as well as a few that did not make the list but that did make the headlines. It is appropriate to question whether these crises are related in any way. Academy defenders have maintained that these events are unrelated. Often they suggest that the only consistent factor underlying these events is the moral decay in American society. A review of the Naval Academy crises over the past eight years reveals that cultural factors particular to the Academy itself have contributed to the damage done to its institutional image.

Since 1989, and throughout the 1990s, the Naval Academy's organizational crises have generated increased levels of public scrutiny, congressional oversight, and media coverage -- much of it negative. The Naval Academy's role in maintaining and perpetuating Navy culture has provided the academic institution with its own organizational ethos that is exaggerated and entrenched. This extremely strong organizational culture is supported by enduring values that have both contributed to the causes of some of the crisis events, and have also guided official reactions to the public outcry resulting from them. Some of these are exaggerated elements of Navy organizational culture, such as an extreme commitment to tradition, an elite self-image, as well as a supreme sense of legitimacy which justifies high levels of autonomy and resistance to change. Since the crisis events have occurred with regularity over the past eight years, it is possible to review the events, identify problematic cultural factors and determine whether efforts to achieve organizational change are addressing these factors.

In this chapter I will outline three major crisis events that occurred during the past eight years, and describe the actions and reactions of Naval Academy officials as they attempted to handle the problems and repair damage to the institution's image. The crises which proved to be most troublesome for the Academy image, and which prompted the greatest commitment to change from Academy officials, included the 1989 Gwen Dreyer

sexual harassment and hazing indecent, the 1992 Electrical Engineering (EE) 311 exam cheating scandal, and the critical editorial written by faculty member James Barry and published by *The Washington Post* in March 1996.

I will explain why these events were newsworthy and describe Academy crisis management behaviors in terms of the phases of crisis response and cultural redemption outlined by David Ross and James Benson to help understand what types of behaviors were most constructive or counterproductive. There is evidence that public affairs functions have gained high status at the Naval Academy over the years; however, some decisions still reflect a lack of understanding about what causes bad publicity. A look at the evolution of Academy crisis management reveals that a willingness to consider pervasive cultural problems has not developed to the same degree.

### **1. The 1989 Gwen Dreyer Sexual Harassment/Hazing Incident**

The first crisis occurred in December 1989, when Gwen Dreyer, a female midshipman, was “chained to a urinal, taunted and photographed by male classmates.”<sup>135</sup> The 19 year-old daughter and granddaughter of Naval Academy graduates believed that she was hazed and sexually harassed during the incident. Months later, when the story broke, it was widely reported that Academy officials had attempted to convince Dreyer’s father that because she was seen smiling in some of the photographs, she could not have been treated that badly. Midshipman Dreyer consistently maintained that she had no choice but to “go along” with the degrading episode to avoid further humiliation.

Following what Dreyer and her family viewed as a slow and unenthusiastic investigation, during which Midshipman Dreyer said she was pressured by her peers and Academy officials alike not to pursue the charges, honor hearings were held. The episode was dismissed as “an isolated incident,” an Army-Navy week prank that got out of hand.

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<sup>135</sup>“A Look at Some Recent Naval Academy Problems,” *Gannet News Service*, 27 April 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.



Two midshipmen were given demerits, and after the Dreyer's complained about the lack of accountability reflected in this limited sentence, six more midshipmen received letters of caution. Midshipman Dreyer resigned from the Academy in May 1990 "citing her humiliation and outrage" over the incident as well as the way it was handled by Academy officials.<sup>136</sup>

The event itself and its subsequent handling reflected a serious lack of understanding about, as well as a high tolerance of, sexual harassment and hazing. The decisions made by Academy officials to minimize the significance of this event were clearly out of step with public expectations of safety and dignity for the young men and women selected to attend the elite institution. News of the event "provoked a national outcry and led the embarrassed academy to prohibit hazing and adopt a 'zero tolerance' policy on sexual harassment."<sup>137</sup> It is interesting to note that hazing had been illegal at the Naval Academy since 1874. Additionally, just two years before the Dreyer incident, Academy leaders had implemented major changes to correct serious problems with sexual harassment and discrimination against women.<sup>138</sup> Sexual harassment and hazing were not new problems at the Naval Academy.

This event did not have to become the media event that it did. The incident was low on the dimension scale -- the harm that was done to Midshipman Dreyer could have been redressed by academy officials with no resulting media attention. The delayed investigation, attempts to dismiss the event as a prank, and light punishment showed a lack of sensitivity to Midshipman Dreyer's experience and an unwillingness to take hazing or

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<sup>136</sup>Molly Moore, "Navy, Congress Open Probes of Harassment at Annapolis," *The Washington Post*, 18 May 1990, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 Aug 1997.

<sup>137</sup>JoAnna Daemmrich, "Women at the Naval Academy: 20 Years Later. Last of Three Parts," *The Baltimore Sun*, 11 February 1997, pg. 1A. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>138</sup>Moore, "Navy, Congress Open Probes of Harassment at Annapolis," p. A1.

sexual harassment seriously. Had officials reacted in a timely manner, applied the definitions of hazing and sexual harassment provided by higher authority, investigated the possibility of wider sexual harassment or hazing problems at the school, and punished the perpetrators appropriately, then there would have been no need for the Dreyer's to seek vindication and justice through the media. The story did not become public until Midshipman Dreyer resigned from the Academy in the Spring; officials had many months to address the situation. In addition, Academy officials had a high degree of control over how they could have handled her complaint. Academy officials were aware that Dreyer and her family were unhappy with what they viewed as the light punishment meted out to the perpetrators by the midshipman honor boards. Naval Academy Superintendent Rear Admiral Virgil Hill reportedly was not entirely satisfied himself.<sup>139</sup> However, he declined to take actions which might have diffused this case, such as imposing stiffer punishment, or considering the possibility that hazing and sexual harassment might be more significant problems that needed to be addressed.

When the story came out, various aspects of the case ensured that it would be considered newsworthy. The idea of a young, patriotic woman chained to a urinal was dramatic and repulsive to many Americans. It fulfilled the "big guy versus the little guy" theme, and revealed that Academy practices were not meeting public expectations. The event also served as a vehicle for larger social issues of interest such as sexual harassment, which had already become a subject of ongoing media coverage especially where the military was concerned.<sup>140</sup> Reports that Dreyer's peers ostracized and socially isolated her after she came forward with her complaint added to the drama of her case.

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Tom Bowman, "Academy's Chief Hurt by Scandal," *The Baltimore Sun*, 12 April 1994, p. 1B. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

That Academy officials mishandled the event and generated a crisis is not surprising. The Navy fought gender integration of the Academy in the 1970s when Congress made it the law, and a resistance to women at the Academy still existed fifteen years later. At the time of the Dreyer incident, women comprised about 10 percent of the student body. A 1990 survey revealed that women's presence was opposed by half of the male midshipmen.<sup>141</sup> A Navy Inspector General (IG) study the same year revealed that over half the female midshipmen and more than one-third of the male midshipmen believed that sexual harassment was a serious problem at the Academy.<sup>142</sup> This information could have been available to Academy officials before the Dreyer crisis had they sought it out, but protecting the institution was a higher, and more culturally consistent, priority.

The Naval Academy culture reflects an extreme commitment to tradition; this is largely a male tradition. Protection of this tradition has contributed to the perpetuation of negative attitudes about women. A 1994 Naval Postgraduate School Thesis concluded that midshipmen did not come to the Academy with strong negative attitudes about women, but instead these attitudes were socially constructed at the Academy. According to this study, soon after male midshipmen arrived at the Academy, "Senior male midshipmen communicated through various means that female midshipmen were subordinate . . . and should be treated accordingly."<sup>143</sup>

Academy reactions to the Dreyer case and the crisis created by its mishandling included denial that sexual harassment or hazing were problems. Using Ross and Benson's model, this was the rebellion phase of crisis management. Academy officials and upperclass midshipmen reluctantly held the required hearings, and applied their own

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<sup>141</sup>Daemmrich, "Women at the Naval Academy: 20 Years Later. Last of Three Parts," pg. 1A.

<sup>142</sup>Moore, "Navy, Congress Open Probes of Harassment at Annapolis," p. A1.

<sup>143</sup>Douglas S. Borrebach and Norman G. FitzPatrick, *Social Construction of Gender in the Navy* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 1994), p. 78.

culturally consistent standards and definitions of hazing and sexual harassment (instead of using those provided by laws and regulations) to justify a finding that only minimal harm was done by this isolated prank. When the story became public, denial failed to provide the hoped-for results; it only served to increase the public outrage and media coverage. So Academy officials moved quickly to the retreat phase which included a call for an investigation into the possibility that hazing and sexual harassment were problems, and a steady stream of programs and policies designed to “fix” problems which were never fully acknowledged in public.

Long after the incident occurred, the superintendent called for a reactivation of the Women Midshipmen Study Group (which was deactivated after reforms were implemented two years prior), and requested that the Academy Board of Visitors, an advisory body of prominent civilians and Naval Academy graduates, appoint a subcommittee to look at the treatment of women at the school. At the same time, Congress took an interest in both hazing and sexual harassment at the service academies. The Senate Armed Services Committee pressured the Secretary of the Navy and the CNO to launch a Navy IG probe, and the House Armed Services Committee announced its own investigation.

The Navy IG reported that it was unable to determine the extent of hazing at the Naval Academy. One reason for this was evidence that officials downgraded possible hazing incidents to less serious “violations of the fourth class indoctrination system regulations.” The Navy IG also found that the Gwen Dreyer case met the definition of hazing provided by law. The report concluded that the academy findings “may reflect an institutional insensitivity to the kind of treatment that should be unacceptable when meted out to classmates by future officers of the United States Navy.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office, *DOD Service Academies: More Changes Needed to Eliminate Hazing* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GAO, 1992), p. 18.



A GAO study requested by the Senate Armed Services Committee found that in spite of the ban, hazing has never been completely eliminated from the service academies, and it has been under-reported as a result of reluctance on the part of Academy officials to take a hard line against activities that may be interpreted as traditional indoctrination methods.<sup>145</sup> Aside from articulating stronger prohibitions against sexual harassment and hazing following the Dreyer incident, Academy officials introduced new, more positive leadership behaviors, and clarified the distinction between hazing and legitimate fourth class indoctrination to help reduce hazing. The GAO report indicated that the changes appeared to be effective in reducing some inappropriate behaviors, though others continued to exist.

Congressional interest in sexual harassment at the Naval Academy resulted in a series of studies which revealed that women were not well integrated into the brigade. Negative attitudes about women were pervasive and inappropriate behaviors toward them existed to such an extent “that most midshipmen readily acknowledge that women are not accepted as equals,” said one report, “This lack of acceptance has created an environment in which steady, low-level sexual harassment passes as normal operating procedure.”<sup>146</sup>

A later GAO report looked at student attitudes during the 1993-1994 school year. The study confirmed the results of earlier research, that sexual harassment continued to be a problem at the Academy. Another important finding was a consistent perception among female midshipmen that “those reporting sexual harassment would encounter significant negative consequences.” Study authors concluded that because of this, underreporting of sexual harassment incidents could be expected to continue in the future.<sup>147</sup> A 1995 study

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>146</sup>Report by the U.S. Naval Academy Women Midshipmen Study Group cited in Felicity Barringer, “4 Inquiries Cite Naval Academy For Rife Sexism,” *The New York Times*, 10 October 1990, p. A12. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>147</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office, *DOD Service Academies: Update on Extent of*



by a Naval Academy consultant found that the Naval Academy climate was “neutral to hostile to women.”<sup>148</sup>

Cultural change is a slow process. At the Naval Academy, evidence shows that even after years of addressing sexual harassment and gender integration issues, attitudes have a long way to go before they reflect stated Navy policy of full acceptance. Impediments to necessary cultural change following the Dreyer case included an unwillingness to admit that sexual harassment and hazing problems existed, disregard for public and congressional expectations of high standards of behavior, lack of sophistication about media coverage, and a refusal to acknowledge that real cultural change was necessary. Instead, Academy officials tried to protect the institution and its traditions by minimizing the issues and promoting quick fixes. As a result, greater harm to the institution was done and necessary changes were delayed.

Ultimately, the Academy superintendent responsible for handling the Dreyer case found his career stalled because of the crisis. Rear Admiral Thomas Lynch took over in June 1991 to help the school repair its image.

## **2. The Electrical Engineering 311 Exam Cheating Scandal**

The second major crisis revolved around the fair application of the Academy honor system when it was revealed that in December 1991 an Electrical Engineering 311 exam had been compromised. The cheating in and of itself generated media attention and public concern; however, mishandling by Academy officials again increased public scrutiny and congressional involvement which eventually led to major changes at the Academy, a severely damaged public image of the institution, and the premature ends to the careers of both the commandant and superintendent.

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*Sexual Harassment* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995), p. 2.  
<sup>148</sup>Daemmrich, “Women at the Naval Academy: 20 Years Later. Last of Three Parts,” pg. 1A.

For over a century since its founding in 1845, the Naval Academy lacked a formal honor code or system. By the turn of the century, an informal code had evolved which prohibited midshipmen from reporting classmates to higher authority for any offense. Students were to settle issues of honor among themselves. President Theodore Roosevelt attempted to abolish this informal code in 1905 when a death resulted from a fight over a challenge to a midshipman's integrity. It was not until 1951 that the official honor concept and honor committee system were approved and implemented. The original honor concept stated: "Midshipmen are persons of integrity: They do not lie, cheat, or steal."<sup>149</sup>

The worst cheating scandal in Naval Academy history represented a crisis of high dimension, about which academy officials could exercise a relatively high level of control. Because the cheating violated one of the most basic and well known formal institutional values, the damage to the school's image caused by the scandal itself was bound to be significant. In response to the event, officials could react in ways that ranged from acknowledging the full extent of the cheating, seriously investigating the factors that contributed to the scandal, and making changes to prevent future cheating on the same scale; or, they could minimize the event in the hopes of minimizing the damage, make short-term institutional protection the highest priority, deny that any organizational problems existed, and hope that sooner rather than later the media spotlight would turn elsewhere. To the Academy's detriment, officials made decisions tending toward the latter series of options. As one reporter summed up the situation: "If the scandal embarrassed the academy, the investigation shamed it. . . . At first, the case was grossly underexplored

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<sup>149</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office, *DOD Service Academies: Comparison of Honor and Conduct Adjudicatory Processes* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995), p. 17.

by a school administration that seemed afraid of what it might find. Later, it overreacted as agents from the Pentagon showed up.”<sup>150</sup>

EE 311 is a required and notoriously difficult course for all non-engineering majors at the Naval Academy. On 11 December 1992, a copy of the EE 311 exam was obtained by a midshipman from unknown sources. By the evening of 13 December, the exam had been sold to other midshipmen or given in full or in part to others who were scheduled to take the exam the next morning. Some of those who received the questions knew what they were looking at, others assumed that they were practice questions like so many others that circulated among midshipmen prior to exams. Within hours of the exam, several students came forward to faculty to report that the exam had been compromised, and some indicated that football team members may have been involved. The following day, the superintendent, Rear Admiral Lynch, was informed of the compromise. A preliminary investigation involved a review of test scores to determine if grades were unusually high, as well as discussions with the midshipmen named in the initial accusations. Officials reviewing the exam scores saw no evidence of cheating, but not all of the tests had been graded. Midshipmen interviewed by the commandant convinced him that “the report [of cheating] was not credible.”<sup>151</sup>

Subsequent reports of cheating from other midshipmen over the next few days, as well as concerns that criminal acts such as breaking and entering and theft may have been committed, prompted Academy officials to call for a Navy Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) investigation. According the Navy IG report, there was no effort to limit the scope of the NCIS investigation. The investigation identified a group of students who

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<sup>150</sup>Brock, Pope, “The Extremes of Honor; Investigation into Cheating Scandal at U.S. Naval Academy,” *Esquire* 122, no. 4 (October 1994), p. 114. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>151</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Naval Inspector General *Compromise of the Fall 1992 Electrical Engineering Final (EE 311) Examination*, p. 4.

might have been involved in the cheating, but was unable to reveal the original source of the compromise. The Academy staff judge advocate recommended that one or two of the implicated midshipmen be referred to court-martial, but the superintendent believed that a procedure at that level was inappropriate in this case; no criminal charges were brought. The criminal focus of the NCIS investigation led to the issuance of Article 31(b), UCMJ rights protecting midshipmen against self-incrimination. This action had the effect of allowing numerous midshipmen to refuse to answer questions that under less stringent investigative standards they would have been compelled to answer. NCIS is not usually concerned with non-criminal acts such as violations of the honor concept, and therefore should not have been expected to pursue them with the same intensity that it investigated possible criminal activity.

The NCIS investigation identified 39 midshipmen who may have possessed the examination, or some part of it. Based on this investigation, the Academy honor system began processing the cases with 28 of the 39 identified midshipmen actually being accused of an honor violation. The conduct of midshipman run honor boards and investigations was problematic. Midshipmen assigned to serve as investigating officers (IO) were only provided portions of the NCIS investigation that pertained directly to the accused midshipman in a particular case. The IOs could see that the cases were all interrelated, but did not have access to information which would have allowed them to understand how they were connected. The Brigade Honor Secretary later told Navy investigators that obvious conspiracies and collusion couldn't be examined because "censorship of the evidence plagued the board."<sup>152</sup> The honor system was not designed to handle cases as large and complex as this one, and as a result, IOs could not adequately prepare their cases and hearing outcomes were inconsistent. In addition, the Honor boards were

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<sup>152</sup>Brock, Pope, "The Extremes of Honor," p. 114.



conducted under the assumption that the accused midshipman was telling the truth, so they were not effective at dealing with cases in which individuals who violated the honor concept also lied about it.

The midshipman honor committee chairman dismissed four of the 28 cases following further investigation by members of the brigade. Eleven of the 24 cases which went before honor boards were upheld as violations; these cases were then forwarded to the commandant of midshipmen. The commandant dismissed four cases, and then forwarded seven to the superintendent. One midshipman found guilty by the honor boards, but dismissed by the commandant, was the son of one of the superintendent's long-time friends, and the student was a current friend of the superintendent's son. The Navy IG found that although there was no evidence of conflict of interest, there was a strong perception that of lack of impartiality among members of the brigade, "and that Academy officials were not sufficiently sensitive to this perception."<sup>153</sup>

The superintendent dismissed one more case prior to forwarding six cases to the Secretary of the Navy with recommendations that all six midshipmen be separated from the Navy. Rear Admiral Lynch then announced the results of the honor hearings to the brigade, and requested that midshipmen bring any new information forward. No additional actions were taken.

When new information was presented to Academy officials in May 1993 by the honor committee chairman, officials determined that he was no longer objective where this case was concerned. They decided to remove him from his duties early. Later investigations found that by this point, many midshipmen were aware that the cheating was more widespread than the NCIS investigation revealed, as was a perception that the honor system was used to white-wash the whole episode. According to the Brigade

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<sup>153</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Naval Inspector General *Compromise of the Fall 1992 Electrical Engineering Final (EE 311) Examination*, p. 27.



Honor Secretary, "The Honor Staff unanimously agreed the entire process had been an abortion. . . . The worst part of it all, was that the administration appeared satisfied that a thorough job had been done."<sup>154</sup> Virtually nothing was done to investigate this new information until a press inquiry was received several weeks later. Soon after the press inquiry, *The Baltimore Sun* published an article critical of the academy's handling of the cheating case. The article was quickly followed by a senatorial request for a Navy IG investigation.

This Navy IG investigation lasted from June 1993 to January 1994. As a result, 133 cases were identified which required further review, including the six cases already recommended for separation. The Navy IG advised that the responsibility for processing the 133 cases be taken away from the Naval Academy, an unprecedented action. The CNO accepted the Navy IG recommendation, and appointed a panel to rule on the new cases and review the old ones. 106 cases received hearing, 24 midshipmen were expelled, and sixty-four were punished.<sup>155</sup> Rear Admiral Lynch appreciated the gravity of the event he had just weathered, "Yes, the electrical engineering thing has been a watershed. It's shaken us to our boots here."<sup>156</sup>

This event was of interest to news organizations from the start, and it only increased in media value as charges of investigation mismanagement and lack of commitment to the honor concept surfaced. The damage caused by a large-scale cheating scandal could not be contained; this was a high dimension crisis. Academy officials, however, did have control over the way the cases of cheating could be handled. A desire to minimize the extent of the cheating, and therefore the magnitude of the scandal, only served to magnify the damage and cause new problems. Aside from the contrast between

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<sup>154</sup>Brock, Pope, "The Extremes of Honor," p. 114.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid.

<sup>156</sup>Theresa Winslow, "Lynch: Mids Need Mentor," *The Capital*, 19 April 1994, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

publicized Academy ideals and apparent cheating and lying behavior which fit the media “appearance versus reality” theme, this case served as a vehicle to examine other Academy values. These revolved around the importance of varsity sports, as well as official dedication to impartial due process for accused midshipmen. Neither subject escaped severe criticism in the media.

Accused students who were willing to talk to the press helped to create personal stories of high drama which played up the “big guy versus the little guy” theme, and made Academy decisions look extremely inconsistent. Media attention and public outcry led to congressional involvement and calls for investigations. Both the Navy IG investigation, as well as a Board of Visitor’s Honor Committee investigation concluded that the Academy suffered from a systemic lack of commitment to honor and integrity.

The IG investigation found that midshipmen generally “viewed the Honor Concept as an ideal that simply could not be applied to many of the problems that arise in the daily life of a midshipman at the Academy.”<sup>157</sup> This finding indicated that informal values were at odds with officially stated organizational values. Because the compromised exam eventually involved 80 percent of the companies, the IG concluded that failure to embrace the honor concept was widely represented in the brigade.

Excessive loyalty among peers was also a problem. Many midshipmen lied to investigators to protect themselves and classmates. The Navy IG report singled out 14 midshipmen, 11 of whom were athletes, who “presented a united wall of silence.” These midshipmen won grants of immunity, and still refused to give truthful testimony for the most part. One reason for this lack of cooperation was the belief among numerous midshipmen that loyalty to one’s classmates was a superior value. Plebes are taught early on not to “bilge” (report on) classmates. This norm, which echoed the informal code in

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<sup>157</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Naval Inspector General *Compromise of the Fall 1992 Electrical Engineering Final (EE 311) Examination*, p. 21.

force at the turn of the century, was reinforced by peers to an extreme degree. In addition, the investigation found that midshipmen believed that the honor concept was applied unfairly. They saw that those telling the truth received the stiffest punishments, and believed that Academy officials were not dedicated to finding the truth, as evidenced by their lack of willingness to act on new information until it was reported in the press.

A 1993 Board of Visitors Honor Review Committee reported that midshipmen's attitudes about honor became increasingly cynical over the four year stay at the academy. A 1994 GAO study confirmed this finding. The 1994 GAO study found that less than a quarter of the midshipmen surveyed believed that the regulations were applied uniformly or that disciplinary actions were consistent for identical offenses. Only one third agreed with the statement that disciplinary actions tended to be appropriate to the offense.<sup>158</sup>

In 1994, the honor concept was changed to read: "Midshipmen are persons of integrity: They stand for that which is right."<sup>159</sup> However, a 1995 GAO study revealed that midshipmen were still divided about what was most honorable. Most midshipmen viewed duty as the highest form of honor (over 50 percent agreed with this notion), but a significant minority, about 45 percent, believed or were undecided over the question of whether loyalty among friends was the highest form of honor. Over fifty percent of the midshipmen surveyed were not sure they would turn in a friend for an honor violation, whether the incident was a "clear-cut" violation or only a possible one.<sup>160</sup>

There was also a perception that the superintendent was overly protective of the football team, a privileged group of varsity athletes that he defended publicly after the NCIS investigation. The Navy IG report stated that his "understandable pride in he football team has unfortunately led to the appearance that he gives football players

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<sup>158</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office, *DOD Service Academies: Comparison of Honor and Conduct Adjudicatory Processes*, pp. 71-89.

<sup>159</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60-63.

preferential treatment that is inconsistent with the Honor Concept.”<sup>161</sup> Ultimately, the Navy IG questioned the superintendent’s commitment to the honor concept, in part because he held an unrealistic, highly ideal view of midshipmen.

Although Rear Admiral Lynch was found to have “the clearest, most direct understanding of the application of the honor concept to the compromise of the EE 311 exam,” his overly high regard for midshipmen prevented him from realistically considering the extent of the cheating cover-up.<sup>162</sup> In testimony before a Senate subcommittee in February 1994, he stated, “I found it almost unbelievable that any midshipman would knowingly and repeatedly lie to investigators. . . . It is the antithesis of all that we teach and that we believe.”<sup>163</sup> The report concluded that “for a variety of reasons . . . a climate was created and/or allowed to exist at the Academy that resulted in a failure of leadership, staff, and midshipmen to understand, embrace, and/or support the Honor Concept.”<sup>164</sup> Rear Admiral Lynch was most comfortable believing in the superlative Academy self-image. To question that ideal view would amount to threatening the security of the institution by admitting to possible weaknesses.

This denial that widespread honor violations could have occurred characterized the rebellion phase in this case. It lasted until the Navy IG inspection results were known. Rebellion resulted in a lack of enthusiasm for getting to the root of the problem. The Navy IG, in testimony before the Senate, stated that he believed that Academy officials “were anxious to get to the end” of the investigation, but not necessarily to the bottom of

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Angela Callahan, “Lynch Admits He was Slow in Academy Cheating Probe,” *The Capital*, 4 February 1994, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>164</sup>U.S. Department of the Navy, Naval Inspector General *Compromise of the Fall 1992 Electrical Engineering Final (EE 311) Examination*, p. 27.



the cheating.<sup>165</sup> Academy officials were satisfied with an incomplete NCIS investigation which midshipmen knew failed to uncover the extent of the cheating.

As further investigations revealed a much larger honor and integrity problem at the Academy, defenders began blaming society for the general deterioration of American values. Recrimination often involves blaming others, such as society, for institutional problems. The 1997 CSIS panel report pointed out that service academy students do not represent society at large, as often argued by Naval Academy defenders; "Service academies entice some of the brightest and most highly sought-after high school graduates in the country."<sup>166</sup> The Naval Academy seeks technically oriented, competitive, physically fit, high achievers -- preferably those with some sort of leadership experience. These qualifications represent an elite sub-section of America's youth. Furthermore, those students selected to attend are largely white and male. Academy students may reflect certain ethical trends present in society, however, they are not representative of society. At any rate, not all critics were willing to accept this excuse, and outspoken senators blamed the problems on a lack of good leadership. The Board of Visitors Honor Review Committee investigation found that midshipmen had not been educated adequately in honor and integrity. The committee chairman, Richard Armitage testified before a Senate hearing that a "do as I say, not as I do attitude in upperclassmen" existed for years at the Academy, and helped to develop cynicism about the honor concept among younger midshipmen.

Unrelenting pressure made retreat inevitable. During his last months in office, Rear Admiral Lynch implemented new positions and programs to strengthen honor and integrity among the brigade. He created a new ethics officer position, and filled it with a

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<sup>165</sup>Tom Bowman, "Navy Investigator Says the Academy Lacked Zeal in its Probe of Cheating," *The Baltimore Sun*, 4 February 1994, p. 1A. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>166</sup>*Professional Military Education*, p. 27.



highly regarded Marine colonel. Rear Admiral Lynch strengthened test security, restructured the electrical engineering course, directed that honor be taught annually to all midshipmen, and proposed the implementation of a mentoring program. Finally, a new superintendent was named. Although this position was traditionally held by a two-star admiral, a four-star officer and previous superintendent Charles Larson was named to replace Lynch, whose career, once on the fast track, was now stalled for his admitted “failure” to conduct a complete investigation.<sup>167</sup> Senator Richard Shelby, chairman of the Senate Armed Services personnel subcommittee provided a harsher assessment, “It’s obvious to me that the investigation was botched from the beginning.”<sup>168</sup> In the end, the commandant’s promotion to rear admiral would also be a casualty of the cheating scandal.

Once again, an unwillingness to face Academy problems fully led to a series of counterproductive reactions that resulted in more damage to the institution’s image than was caused by the original crisis. The Navy’s decision to bring in a new leadership team with the horse power of a four-star admiral signaled a demand for true restoration of appropriate cultural values at the Academy.

### **3. The Professor Barry Editorial Case**

On March 31, 1996, an article critical of the Academy written by Assistant Professor James Barry was published by *The Washington Post*. The article, entitled “Adrift in Annapolis; To Understand Why the Navy’s Moral Compass Is Broken, Start With the Academy,” charged that the Academy suffered from a “culture of hypocrisy, one that tolerates sexual harassment, favoritism and the covering up of problems.”<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup>Callahan, “Lynch Admits He was Slow in Academy Cheating Probe,” p. A1.

<sup>168</sup>Ibid.

<sup>169</sup>James F. Barry, “Adrift in Annapolis; To Understand Why the Navy’s Moral Compass Is Broken, Start at the Naval Academy,” *The Washington Post*, 31 March 1996, p. C-1. Lexis-Nexis on-line Service accessed 12 August 1997.

His experience at the Academy covered the Dreyer sexual harassment and hazing incident and the cheating scandal -- events which rocked the institution and revealed serious problems of the types he cited. Barry claimed that his repeated attempts to raise these concerns to the Academy bureaucracy, were “met with silence;” he admitted to being “mad as hell” about it.<sup>170</sup>

Barry’s charges were illustrated by anecdotes. He noted the persistent concerns about retribution for reporting sexual harassment, the double standards which benefited varsity athletes, as well as weaknesses in ethics and leadership instruction. He listed “informal Rules of the Road” which encompassed unwritten social norms observed in the brigade. Some of these had been highlighted in the many investigations following earlier crises, such as the punitive nature of the honor and conduct systems, the ascendancy of loyalty over truth, and the prevalence of a “zero defects” mentality. Barry ended his criticism by recommending reforms: establish “an atmosphere of mutual trust among the midshipmen themselves and between them and the administration;” teach more respectful leadership behaviors; allow midshipmen to fail while they are learning; giving the midshipmen more responsibility; de-emphasize varsity sports; stabilize the faculty; and “overhaul” the leadership courses “to bring them into the modern era.”<sup>171</sup>

Many of Barry’s claims had been made before in other forums by other critics. Three factors made this article particularly noteworthy: it was written by an Academy insider; its publication coincided with a spate of midshipman misconduct incidents; and, it criticized an administration led by a man widely hailed a top Navy leader and as a highly effective superintendent.

As a leadership instructor at the Academy for seven years, Barry had a degree of credibility. In and of itself, this letter constituted a challenge to the Academy, but it was

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<sup>170</sup>Ibid.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid.

not really a crisis. On the dimension scale, this letter could cause limited damage, and the Academy had a high degree of control over how the charges could be answered. Admiral Larson had worked hard to correct the institutional problems uncovered in the wake of the earlier crises, he had plenty of ammunition to provide the response warranted by the letter. As soon as he arrived, Larson made developing character his top priority, his next job was “to prove the worth of the service academies to the people of the United States.”<sup>172</sup> He implemented a new character development program, imposed tighter military discipline (reducing liberty away from campus and requiring uniforms more often), and revitalized the leadership curriculum.

A constructive response might have included a rebuttal of the issues raised acknowledging the extent to which charges might be true, and outlining the ongoing programs in place to help correct Academy problems. A commitment to consider Barry’s concerns seriously would have had the effect of diffusing the controversy and bringing the issues back in-house to solve. Instead, Barry was immediately removed from the classroom, and ordered to prepare a report recommending solutions to the problems he had identified. It was later reported that Admiral Larson did not make the decision to remove Barry, but clearly he supported it.<sup>173</sup> This controversial and highly criticized decision ensured that Barry’s charges as well as Larson’s action would be well publicized. Now it was a crisis, and this was the rebellion phase.

The American Association of University Professors raised serious concerns about academic freedom and due process for faculty, they urged Admiral Larson to reverse his decision and put Barry back in the classroom. An association spokesman described this

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<sup>172</sup>Tom Bowman, “New Leader Takes Helm of U.S. Naval Academy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 2 August 1994, p. 4B. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>173</sup>Bradley Peniston, “Embattled Professor Returns to Class at Naval Academy,” *The Capital*, 8 April 1996, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

case as one of the more serious ones it had handled in its 80 year-old history.<sup>174</sup> The decision to remove Barry was widely criticized as defensive and punitive. Admiral Larson took it personally; "He betrayed me."<sup>175</sup> Academy reactions to the article appeared to be emotionally based and counterproductive. By April 6, Barry was reinstated in the classroom, and Admiral Larson's rebuttal was published. In the letter, Admiral Larson acknowledged that problems existed when he arrived 20 months earlier, and he outlined the numerous initiatives designed to address the problems. He cited data from surveys that indicated that these initiatives had been extremely effective in solving the problems.<sup>176</sup> It was a good news letter, but it was too late.

This new crisis was compounded by a series of incidents of midshipman misconduct that raised questions about whether the Academy was as shipshape as Admiral Larson believed it was. On March 26, a midshipman was accused of sexually molesting a two year-old in the home of a local family. On the 4th of April the third highest ranking midshipman was arrested and accused of sexually assaulting four female midshipmen and threatening one of them. April 11, two current and three former midshipmen were indicted by a federal grand jury for participating in a multistate auto theft ring. The same day, a midshipman involved in a drug case that broke the previous October was sentenced to 20 months hard labor following his conviction for possession, use and distribution of LSD and use of marijuana. On April 16th, two midshipmen were charged with breaking and entering into the bedroom of the daughter of a former state police chief.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup>Amy Argetsinger, "Academy Urged to Let Teacher Return to Class," *The Washington Post*, 5 April 1996, p. B-3. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>175</sup>Tom Bowman, "Removed Naval Instructor Will Return to Classroom; Superintendent Reverses Action Against Critic," *The Baltimore Sun*, 6 April 1996, p. 14B. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>176</sup>Charles R. Larson, Admiral, USN "'Adrift in Annapolis': Rough Seas," *The Washington Post*, 6 April 1996, p. A15. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>177</sup>"A Look at Some Recent Naval Academy Problems," *Gannett News Service*, 27 April



Charges of serious criminal behavior among midshipmen at the Academy were highly dramatic and sure to be newsworthy, especially in view of the ongoing Barry controversy. In his article, Barry had claimed that “wonderful young people become immersed in an ethically corrupting system.”<sup>178</sup> He was referring to a system that created cynical midshipmen who violated regulations they felt were superfluous -- like school rules concerning driving and sex on campus -- not a system that encouraged felonious behavior. But this was irrelevant. Numerous articles were written contrasting Barry’s general themes to the spate of new scandals. Wider Navy problems were also brought into the discussions. “The problem with the Academy is partly a problem with the Navy writ large,” said former Navy secretary James Webb, as he commented about the unethical behavior of Navy leaders in general.<sup>179</sup> Academy officials were reportedly spending much of their time reacting to the criticism.

In all three cases, rebellion, recrimination and retreat were happening all at once. Repeatedly Academy officials characterized the recent cases as unrelated and unrepresentative of midshipmen behavior. Academy officials claimed that civilian-like standards at the Academy had contributed to the embarrassing problems. Admiral Larson argued that the problems he faced when he took over could take years to solve; he had only been in charge for 20 months. A stand-down was ordered after the breaking and entering incident. Midshipmen were confined to the Yard for a week to focus on solutions to the new problems. Contact with the press was curtailed, and at the request of the midshipmen, privileges were restricted and military discipline was increased.<sup>180</sup>

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1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>178</sup>Barry, “Adrift in Annapolis,” p. C-1.

<sup>179</sup>Art Pine, “Navy Academy Ponders its Course in Troubled Waters; Military: School is Rocked by More Scandals as it Tries to Restore Image. Problems Fuel Debate About the Top Brass,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 1996, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>180</sup>Tom Stuckey, “Naval Academy Officials Increase Restriction on Midshipmen,” *The*

Soon, members of the Board of Visitors began expressing interest in appointing an outside panel to review the situation at the Academy.<sup>181</sup> This was unwelcome news to Academy officials who wanted a chance to deal with the current situation without the interference of a high-visibility investigation.

By mid May, Barry's report on Academy problems had been presented to the Board of Visitors in a day-long session, and, although his sweeping charges of institutional decay were not supported by the board, some issues were considered legitimate. Tighter screening of applicants was announced, as was a decision to hire a private consultant to look at quality of life at the Academy.<sup>182</sup> The Board of Visitors unanimously supported this action, and at the same time praised Admiral Larson for his dedication to solving tough institutional problems.

By August, Academy officials announced new elements of the character development program. Later in the year Admiral Larson established new ethics and leadership chairs. Serious efforts to reform Academy culture, which were begun when Admiral Larson arrived in 1994, were continuing after an interruption in April when the Barry crisis broke. Unfortunately, the way that event was handled set Admiral Larson's program back and made his job harder. The Academy's inappropriate reaction to the Barry article might have been avoided if crisis management practices and policies had been adopted by the Naval Academy.

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*Associated Press*, 25 April 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>181</sup>Mark Johnson, "U.S. Naval Academy Tightens Its Regimen; Weeklong Stand Down Follows A String of Scandals," *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, 2 May 1996, p. A-2. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

<sup>182</sup>Tom Bowman, "Higher Precept Set for Mids; Naval Academy, Beset by Criminal Behavior, to Tighten Screening; 'Problems Not Totally Solved;' Civilian Board Makes Recommendations After Closed Session," *The Baltimore Sun*, 14 May 1996, p. A1. Lexis-Nexis on-line service accessed 12 August 1997.

#### **4. Crisis Management at the Naval Academy**

Just as the Navy has not officially adopted a broad definition of crisis, the Naval Academy has not undertaken efforts to develop or adopt crisis management practices or procedures which encompass the human relations related events from which it has suffered over the last decade. However, the sitting public affairs officer, Rear Admiral (select) Tom Jurkowsky, notes that after the events of April 1996, he and other Academy officials informally recognized that “situations that lead an institution to be questioned by the public” qualify as organizational crises.<sup>183</sup> In his review, these events include those that degrade public trust, cause loss of credibility, or prompt others to question institutional values. The Academy has not codified methods for dealing with these types of events, experience, good judgment and intuition have guided Academy crisis management.

According to Rear Admiral (select) Jurkowsky, an informal team approach to crisis events has been developed during Admiral Larson’s tenure. The superintendent always consults with the staff judge advocate and the public affairs officer on cases which have the potential to be crises. Other officials are represented when the circumstances warrant it; for example, if midshipmen are involved the commandant is part of the team, or if the issue involves academics then the dean of faculty is present.

The Academy public affairs philosophy, which has strong support from Admiral Larson, promotes many of the preventive crisis management activities, as well as some of the active crisis management practices advocated by experts. This public affairs philosophy has several basic elements. According the Rear Admiral (select) Jurkowsky, the primary characteristic of the Academy public affairs philosophy is an open approach to the media, and a commitment to providing the greatest degree of media access. Legal and privacy concerns are still a factor in decision making, but on a routine basis, maximum

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<sup>183</sup>Tom Jurkowsky, Rear Admiral (select), USN, Naval Academy Public Affairs Officer, telephone interview with author, 2 September 1997.

openness is encouraged. As a result, the Larson administration has what it considers to be a very good working relationship with the media. Rear Admiral (select) Jurkowsky says that Admiral Larson recognizes that the Naval Academy will be judged by how events are handled, not necessarily on the events themselves.

The Academy views each crisis as a unique event, says the public affairs officer, and prescribed methods of dealing with them would not be very useful in his view. In addition, he reports that there is little time for systematic reflection or development of lessons learned about each crisis. Rear Admiral (select) Jurkowsky acknowledges that “traditional line attitudes” which call for “killing the story” at any cost still exist in the Navy and among Naval Academy supporters. However, he believes that during his tenure in the Navy, this attitude has changed somewhat for the better. He concluded that a command’s approach to crisis management and public affairs will largely be driven by the personality and perspective of the commander and the public affairs official advising him.

Although Admiral Larson has been relatively successful in his crisis management and cultural reform efforts, when the Barry article was published, he and his administration faltered badly. They behaved in ways predictable by anyone familiar with Navy organizational culture and the subculture of the Naval Academy.

There are several problems with an informal approach to crisis management. Decisions are made in relative isolation, loyalty and organizational protection are required of crisis management team members, and commanders are provided few reasons to reconsider their own decisions. The Barry article crisis demonstrates that knee-jerk reactions may not be prudent; a formalized crisis management system promotes more constructive decision making when leaders are under pressure by forcing them to think about and discuss crises before they occur. In addition, it is just good fortune that public affairs is so highly valued at the Academy today. Future Naval Academy administrations may not benefit from the open and honest public affairs philosophy or a close working



relationship between the superintendent and the public affairs officer which exists today. And aside from the institutional memory provided by the largely civilian public affairs staff and augmented by various files containing limited advice on optimal public affairs practices, lessons learned from crisis management are not collected in any formal or systematic way. This review of recent Naval Academy crises reveals that culturally driven institutional protection through denial and superficial retreat behaviors is counterproductive. The sooner leaders are willing to consider that real cultural change might be necessary, the more likely they are to make constructive crisis management decisions.



## VI. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the Navy has suffered repeatedly from image damaging organizational crises, formal and comprehensive approaches to understanding and preventing them in the future have not been undertaken. As a review of the Naval Academy incidents reveals, some of the crises which have plagued the Navy in the last decade have their roots in deeply held cultural values and behavioral norms which are not shared to the same degree by Americans outside the Navy. Optimal crisis management is that which combines systematic practices and policies with an awareness of the cultural context within which crises occur.

The maintenance of a positive organizational image is important. Barnes points out the connection between public image and organizational legitimacy:

The inter-relationship of legitimacy, public support, and the media make it essential to avoid “bad press” in sensitive and unforgiving peacetime environments. This can be accomplished if military personnel understand and conform to the standards of military legitimacy and avoid conflicts between military and civilian values. The media can help maintain military legitimacy so long as the military remains a positive and constructive force promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.<sup>184</sup>

However, many of the culturally driven responses to crises intended to help protect the Navy’s organizational image have just the opposite effect. Some conflicts between civilian and military values are inevitable; however, military leaders have a choice about how they will handle these conflicts. Denial that the conflicts exist and an unwillingness to consider organizational change are not productive responses.

Today the Navy is faced with the challenge of understanding societal expectations and living up to them or negotiating different ones. In order to do this, formal

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<sup>184</sup>Barnes, *Military Legitimacy*, p. 60.

vulnerability assessments are required. Sophisticated crisis prevention activities, such as issues management are necessary. Additionally, service members must become more aware of the ways that their cultural baggage affects their perceptions. Those who are charged with responding during crisis situations must become aware of the ways that Navy cultural values are not in synch with the wider society; they must be able to avoid knee-jerk rationalization and adopt new strategies and tactics to communicate during crises in ways that address ethical violations and organizational problems that respond to societal values. Informal cultural norms that violate formal organizational values will precipitate societal demands for meaningful organizational change. To minimize organizational damage, leaders must accept responsibility for understanding the problem and initiating meaningful change. Awaiting the imposition of changes from outside the organization is not constructive. Leaders must also understand and communicate to all stakeholders that change will undoubtedly be slow and could be painful for some.

Navy officers need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the modern mass media. If the military-media relationship is to change, the military will have to initiate the improvement. In some ways, the military must adapt to the cultural and technological realities of the modern media. Organizational leaders must understand how and why stories are covered, as well as how the media influences public opinion. Crisis managers should be prepared to work with the mass media to their best advantage, which means adapting to media norms and framing communication in ways that facilitate coverage.

A formal crisis management program should reflect a sufficiently broad definition so as to include the types of image damaging organizational events outlined in this paper. The crisis management planning process should involve a broad range of organizational players. Preventive activities begin with the development of a relevant knowledge base and the study of environmental trends which have the potential to impact the organization.



Vulnerability or risk assessments should be conducted periodically, and preventive activities like issues management should be ongoing. Sensitivity to stakeholder concerns and the maintenance of credibility with the media are critical. Written contingency plans and crisis prevention strategies should be developed. These plans need to be dynamic and operationalized by regular reviews and drills or role playing exercises involving the widest number of organizational members possible.

Active crisis management is largely comprised of crisis evaluation and communication. Crisis managers need to comprehend what type of crisis they are dealing with, what degree of damage is possible, and how much control they are likely to have. This will guide communication, and will help prioritize other crisis management activities. Communication should be preceded by an understanding of what stakeholders are experiencing. Misperceptions should be addressed by providing missing information to ensure that stakeholders view the organization and its efforts accurately. Confusion-based on unfulfilled expectations require a complex approach which involves dialogue concerning organizational goals and values.

The post-crisis phase should lead into the planning and prevention phase. The crisis management team and public relations specialists should analyze the crisis and integrate lessons learned into future efforts. The disequilibrium caused by crises often provides an opportunity to initiate cultural change in an organization; however, an organization that is unprepared to deal with crises often falls back on culturally driven behaviors -- some of which helped cause the crises in the first place.

The key to effective crisis management is an organizational culture which institutionalizes the use of ethical and constructive practices, and which encourages the application of appropriate ideologies and paradigms. The CSIS panel concluded that “perhaps the most fundamental lesson to be instilled in officers is that nothing has greater impact on the ethical behavior of subordinates than the command climate that is created by

senior leaders. Just as in actual operations, commanders lead by example in the realm of ethics and integrity. Senior officers, said the report, provide critical influence over investigation and adjudication processes, over the careers of their subordinates, and they “set the tone and culture for commands.”<sup>185</sup> Said one panel member, “The key point is that anything that officers learn in the classroom can be destroyed by habitual badness in the organization.”<sup>186</sup> The Naval Academy cases clearly revealed that informal, culturally driven behaviors can “undo” the good work of formal policies.

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<sup>185</sup>*Professional Military Education*, p. 47.

<sup>186</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

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